

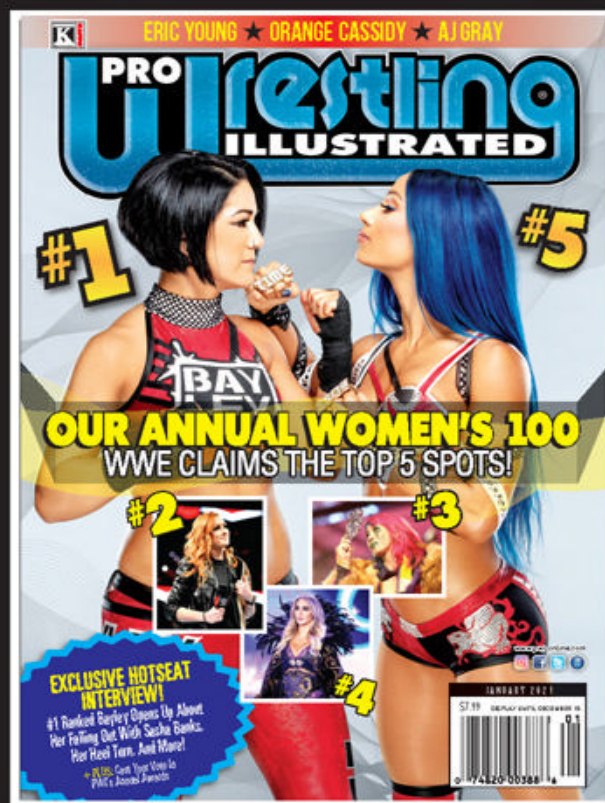
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FROM the DESK OF...

I KNOW IT sounds almost trite to say it, but what a time to be a wrestling fan! There's more televised grappling produced on a regular basis than most folks could reasonably watch, let alone re-watch. I'd like to think that's why you read *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*: to stay informed. And, just as important, to retain that information in some kind of physical place—be that our print magazine or a digital/mobile copy.

Though the concept had disappeared from these pages by the time I began freelancing for *PWI*, I feel the “Supercards” issue is actually a lot more relevant today than it has been in quite some time. With so many big events promoted in any given year—even, as it turns out, during a global pandemic—it can be tough to find the time for even the most buzzworthy shows. And, even if you're somehow able to catch them all, remembering the finer details of all those shows can prove difficult.

That's why I wanted to bring back “Supercards.” Sure, looking up the results of the season's biggest events wouldn't be too hard. But this issue is much more than that. We wanted to create a thorough, yet entertaining time capsule of the global wrestling industry during a particularly fruitful period.

So, how do we do that, exactly? Between December 2020 and January 2021, we identified a batch of supercards worthy of multiple viewings—shows where major titles were on the line, where rivalries came to a head, where careers were (in some cases) totally transformed. While there were certainly some other big events deserving of coverage—AJPW's New Year Wars, Tokyo Joshi Pro '21, and GCW's Fight Forever, to name a few—we chose a total of eight cards to focus our attention on. (I should note: This is about double the number of shows highlighted in most “Supercards” issues.)

Our aim was to provide the quality coverage you've come to expect from *PWI*, with thoughtful analysis, colorful writing and design, and fantastic photos. Seven writers, including myself, watched our assigned shows intently, noting what worked (and what didn't), as well as what impact these individual cards might have on each promotion in the long term. You'll get a lot of different perspectives here, and, personally, I think that's a great thing!

This year's “Supercards” section features 36 full-color pages of reporting on some of the most exciting and newsworthy events in recent memory, from top promotions in the United States, Mexico, and Japan. In addition to match recaps, each section offers plenty of helpful context, fun sidebars, and more. Whether or not you've seen these particular shows, I hope this issue leaves you with a better understanding of the global wrestling landscape in early-2021. Personally, I'm excited to look back on this issue in a year or two, so I can reminisce about this wild period.

If supercards aren't your thing, don't worry: We've got our usual array of columns, profiles, and feature stories to tide you over until the next issue. Plus, you'll find some major updates concerning which championships *PWI* recognizes as legitimate world titles.

I've already kept you long enough. Go on ... enjoy the May 2021 issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*!

Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

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(1919-2002)

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• MAY 2021 • 3

Giulia & Syuri

In the semi-main event of Stardom's Osaka Dream Cinderella, the top dogs of the Donna del Mondo faction clashed, with Syuri (right) and Giulia (left) each trying anything they could to emerge victorious. Find out how the match ended in our Supercards section!

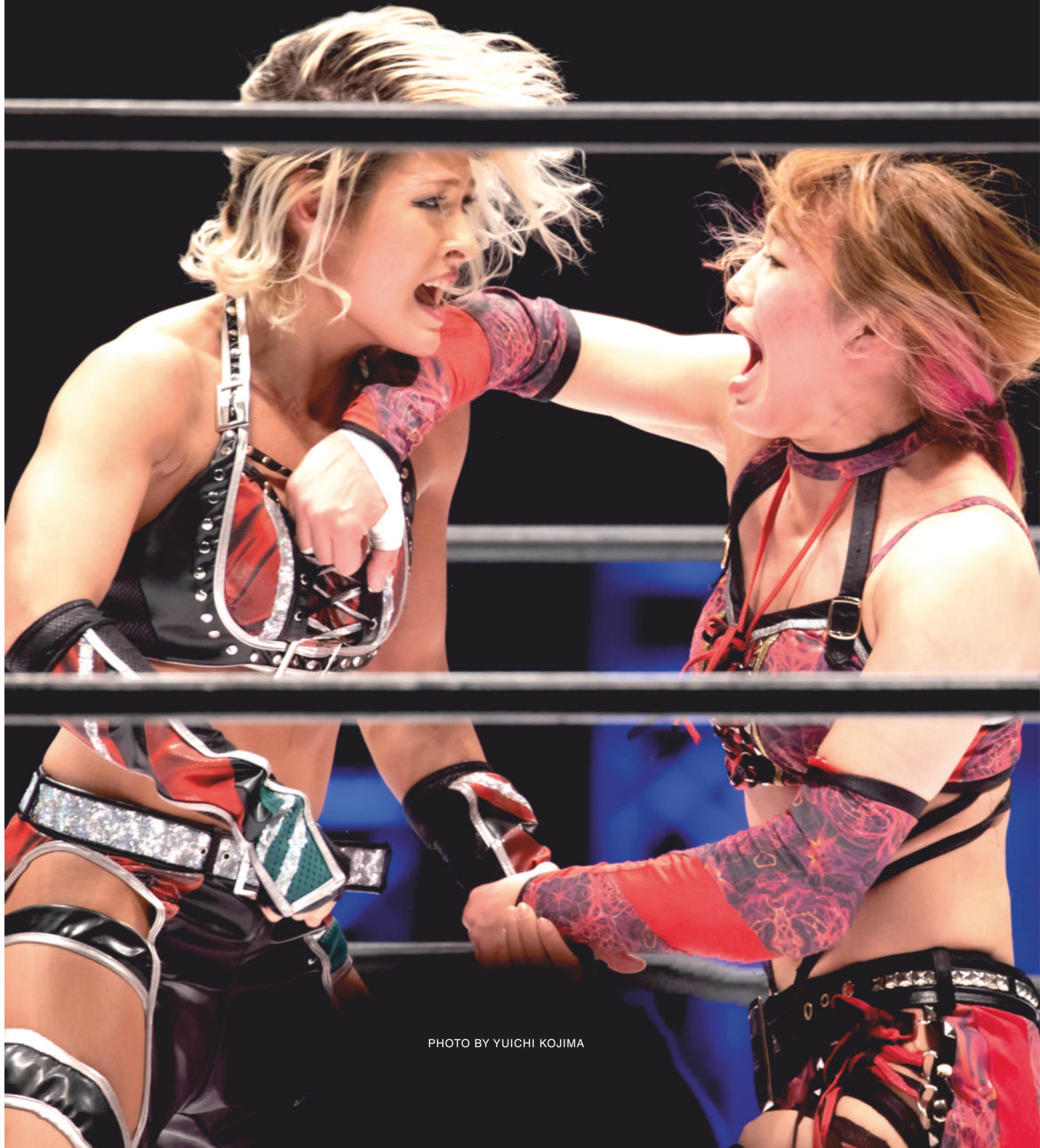


PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA

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20 HOTSEAT: ADAM PEARCE

To many younger WWE fans, Adam Pearce is simply an onscreen surrogate for Vince McMahon. But we know better! More than a few years after their last chat, Pearce opens up to *PWI* Senior Writer Al Castle about his in-ring career, work behind the scenes, and unlikely transition into his current role.

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In-depth coverage of wrestling's top events

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62 WORLD TITLE UPDATE

For the first time, we've formally outlined our criteria for world championship recognition and significantly expanded the list of titles that qualify.

66 LIGHT IT UP LIKE DYNAMITE

Early in the pandemic, Masha Slamovich skipped her flight home to the U.S. to continue training at Japan's Marvelous Dojo. Lauren Founds spoke to the Russian-born grappler about her bold move.

70 NO SIDESHOWS, NO QUOTAS, JUST US

It's no secret wrestling has a problematic history with gender and sexual orientation. Indie wrestler Jamie Senegal has fought hard for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the sport. And, as a longtime *PWI* reader, she's asked to share that story with you.

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KOTA IBUSHI
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BRIAN CAGE (PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW)

COVER DESIGN: LAURA BRUBAKER

BEFORE the BELL

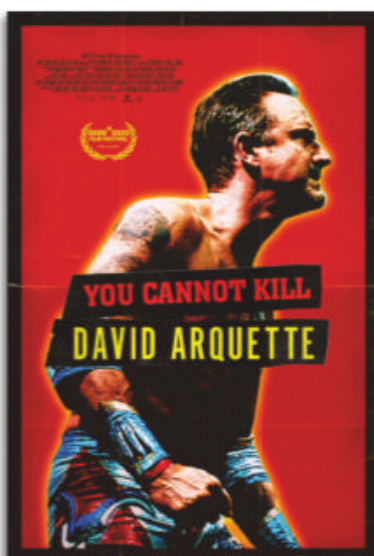
COMPILED BY MIKE BESSLER

REVIEWS

YOU CANNOT KILL DAVID ARQUETTE

For far too long, fans have regarded David Arquette's 2000 run as WCW World champion as one of the lowest in-ring moments in the history of professional wrestling. Unfortunately, Arquette himself has internalized this trope as a personal scourge, allowing the criticism and hateful rhetoric of fans and industry insiders to determine his own happiness and self-worth. For Arquette, redemption felt long beyond reach. But, when things came full circle for him in 2019, filmmakers David Darg and Price James were on hand to chronicle it all via the documentary *You Cannot Kill David Arquette*.

Darg and James start from the ugly beginning, recounting Arquette's estrangement from the acting business, his struggles with substance abuse, and his failed first marriage. What emerges through the prevailing narrative is an image of a man who has struggled greatly, sometimes because of his own unfortunate choices but also because of matters beyond his control, including a tumultuous childhood and his *de facto* ouster from his chosen profession. *You Cannot Kill David Arquette* reveals Arquette's battle against his own demons with the help of behavioral health



interventions, the support of family and friends, and some unlikely allies (including a troop of misfit backyard grapplers).

How much of *You Cannot Kill David Arquette* is unrehearsed is difficult to discern. After all, David Arquette is an experienced actor, and his current wife, Christina McLarty Arquette, ranks among the film's producers. But while some moments and interactions bear the hallmarks of reality TV staging, the raw and genuine content from Arquette and many of his supporting cast lends credibility to this project.

From training exploits in Mexico to a literal near-death experience battling Nick Gage in a hardcore deathmatch, Arquette shows the world once and for all that his heart, soul, and body will always belong to professional wrestling. *You Cannot Kill David Arquette* is far more captivating than a garden-variety wrestling documentary, showing the highs and lows of this tale of ultimate vindication with unflinching candor. We give it four and a half out of five suplexes.



THE ATOMIC ELBOW

Hearkening back to when fanzines were a cherished medium for the die-hardest of die-hard fans, *The Atomic Elbow* presents an informal and irreverent take on professional wrestling. This occasional periodical offers extensive analysis of contemporary developments alongside products from years past, written with an unmistakable affection for wrestling as sport and spectacle. Visually, the fanzine's punk/DIY aesthetic is sure to catch the eye of readers looking for something different in the age of high-impact digital content. But it's the *quality* of content offered by *The Atomic Elbow* that is certain to keep readers coming back for more. **Four out of five suplexes.**



LANCE BY CHANCE: WRESTLING AS A VON ERICH



Through this slim compilation of road stories and reminiscences, Lance Vaughan revisits his time in the spotlight as Lance Von Erich, a kayfabe member of the legendary Von Erich family. Vaughan's priority through this endeavor seems to be a longstanding desire to set the record straight regarding his departure from the WCCW territory in 1987. But, along the way, he shares memories of colorful characters, including Billy Jack Haynes and Chris Adams. Regrettably, the presence of grammatical errors and formatting issues presents distractions in what otherwise constitutes an intriguing collection of stories. **Three out of five suplexes.**

TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each:

10. Matthew McConaughey suggests he may be interested in wrestling for WWE.

In anticipation of an emerging trend in which Academy Award winners might become the next big draw in professional wrestling, Tony Khan immediately signed Nicolas Cage to a 10-year contract with AEW.

9. Keith Lee breaks the ring when he crashes into John Morrison in a match on Monday Night Raw.

Amidst the ensuing chaos, the confused ring crew only made matters worse when they tried to repair the damage by applying bronzer to the ring post and putting a few rivets into Morrison.

8. Vince McMahon files a countersuit against former XFL Commissioner Oliver Luck.

The unusually concise legal brief consisted of only one sentence: "XFL had a Commissioner?"

7. Vince Russo posts an apology video to Dave Meltzer after a flap over online content.

To make up for lost YouTube revenue, Russo announced a partnership with Cameo in which he'll send a personal apology to you or a loved one for the low price of \$29.95.

6. WWE reportedly passes on signing Rush.

Contrary to early reports of a financial dispute, WWE brass didn't sign Rush because he refused to perform "Tom Sawyer" at his tryout.

5. The Boneyard Match at WrestleMania 36 wins the Slammy for 2020's "Match Of The Year."

In other results, Ramblin' Rabbit narrowly defeated Rob Gronkowski in the category of "Most Disturbing Hand Puppet And/Or Celebrity Guest Host Of The Year."

4. Mick Foley publicly calls for Donald Trump to be removed from the WWE Hall of Fame.

Asked if anyone else from wrestling stood with him on this matter, Foley cited fellow WWE alumni Dude Love, Cactus Jack, Mankind, and Mr. Socko.

3. Jeff Jarrett settles his two-year-long lawsuit against Impact Wrestling parent company Anthem.

It was a long, hard slog, but Jarrett finally won back custody of his crock pot and his Johnny Cash records.

2. Sting debuts in AEW.

Sting was originally booked to reunite with an old WCW pal, until it was learned that all of RoboCop's parts had been repurposed to repair a 2012 Toyota Yaris.

1. Charlotte and Ric Flair clash over "The Nature Boy's" budding relationship with Lacey Evans.

Ric's new relationship has him so excited that he's reportedly dusted off his grocery store disguise in hopes of a return appearance on TV's Wife Swap.



PHOTO BY VERN VERNA

WE HEARD THAT!

"I hate to admit this, but I think there was a point in WWE where we had a loss of confidence ... But I can promise you that the confidence is back. We needed to get out of that environment to remind ourselves who we really are and what we can be."

— KARL ANDERSON to *Sports Illustrated*, regarding the *Good Brothers'* move from WWE to Impact Wrestling

"I love Jim Ross and I agree with him."

— DARBY ALLIN to Riju Dasgupta of *Sportskeeda*, responding to J.R.'s criticism of the overuse of high-risk maneuvers

"What a moment that was for me. Roman didn't need AJ Styles. AJ Styles needed Roman Reigns at that time. It was perfect!"

— AJ STYLES, reflecting on his WWE debut in an interview on WWE's *The Bump*

"The bottom line with the whole thing is, I know more people at AEW, and I know there's a lot more heart there."

— EDDIE KINGSTON to Renee Paquette, discussing his decision to sign with AEW instead of WWE

ONE TO WATCH: DANNY LIMELIGHT

It seems the dream is coming full circle for 29-year-old Danny LimeLight, following a series of noteworthy forays into wrestling's big time. With pride in his Puerto Rican heritage and his service in the armed forces, LimeLight's dogged determination has landed him on the precipice of stardom.

As a kid growing up in New York City, LimeLight discovered wrestling through his dad, who was an enthusiastic fan of the sport. Among his earliest memories are his admiration for The Undertaker, The Rock, and Eddie Guerrero.

Despite finding enjoyment in high school sports, things didn't go well for him in the classroom, and he left school at 17. He trained as a boxer, but his search for a stable career led to enlistment in the United States Marine Corps. There, he trained informally with the USMC boxing team, achieved his black belt, and became an instructor for the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP).

In 2012, LimeLight became a resident of Southern California. Two years later, with a renewed interest in wrestling, he began training through a local school and debuted the same year. He found support from West Coast indie vets Mariachi Loco and Little Cholo, as well as John Hennigan, known to WWE fans as John Morrison.

In 2016, LimeLight took a break from pro wrestling to attend drill instructor school, garnering further awards and accolades from the Marines. In 2018, he returned to competition on the indies, bolstered by support from influential players such as Konnan and David Marquez.

LimeLight kicked things into high gear in 2019 with his debut in Impact Wrestling, competing in a five-way scramble for the X division title.

"That was my first major promotion that I got to wrestle for," he recalled. "That was the first time that a lot of people got to see me, and I had the internet talking a little bit."

The buzzworthy appearance was part of a banner year for Danny, who garnered bookings across the country, as well as a tryout for New Japan. Now a regular fixture on *NJPW STRONG*, LimeLight teams with JR Kratos, Chris Dickinson, and Tom Lawler as "Team Filthy."

With extensive training in multiple combat techniques, LimeLight is a versatile and adroit competitor in the ring. From mat work to striking, he is most dangerous in close combat, but

he is also not averse to high-risk aerial maneuvers. Among the most devastating tactics in his repertoire are his Symbiote DDT and an exploder suplex, which he calls "Morir Soñando" ("To Die Dreaming").

In 2020, LimeLight debuted in AEW, initially competing in a series of bouts on *Dark* and later squaring up against Kenny Omega and the Good Brothers in a tag bout on *Dynamite*.

"It has been surreal," he said. "Making my debut with AEW was my six-year-old self's dream come true."

In addition to his current in-ring exploits, LimeLight works as a stuntman and actor. In addition to performing stunts in John Hennigan's film *Speed of Time*, he wrote, produced, and acted in his own short film, *Joe Rib*, which is due for release later this year. Find him on Twitter: @DannyLimeLight.



PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW

FIGHTING FARE: *FAYE JACKSON*

Whenever there's a big fight brewing or a flashy photo shoot on the horizon, Faye Jackson knows just which tunes will get her in the zone. With her penchant for music that entertains and inspires, this hard-hitting, heart-stopping lady grappler shared an enthusiastic rundown of the tracks that really get her going.

► **Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion – “WAP”**

I love songs that empower women sexually. People forget that women are sexual beings or it's too taboo to talk about. Either way, I stan Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

► **Flo Milli – “Beef FloMix”**

*This song gets me into my ****-talking mode. Her energy in this song is my energy for 2021. No talk, just facts.*

► **Azealia Banks – “The Big Big Beat”**

Azealia is SOOOOO TALENTED, yet so misunderstood. Her social media game has no filter and has made a lot of people mad, but she is undeniable. I can relate to this. I wish more people would listen to her.

► **Tevin Campbell – “I’m Ready”**

It's Tevin Campbell, 'nuff said. LEGEND.



PHOTO BY @TOTHEVOID

To hear this and all of our **FIGHTING FARE** playlists, follow us on Spotify: **@OfficialPWI**. [WARNING: May contain explicit lyrics!]

NOSTALGIA REWIND

THE BOILER ROOM BRAWL

In his bestselling book *Have a Nice Day!: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, Mick Foley describes his 1996 Boiler Room Brawl match against Undertaker as an “unloved child” whose goodness only he could see. A quarter-century later, Foley’s ostracized offspring cries out for vindication.

Set in the bowels of Cleveland’s Gund Arena near the top of the SummerSlam card, Foley’s alter-ego Mankind

had a distinct advantage amidst the shadows. Then again, the same might be said for his opponent The Undertaker (and ‘Taker’s handler, Paul Bearer).

The action was hot and heavy, but the dark setting, unusual acoustics, and cheesy “transmission problems” were unfortunate distractions. It also didn’t help that much of the action unfolded far from the live audience and commentators.

Nevertheless, in just under 30 minutes, the Boiler Room Brawl laid the foundation for the epic feud that followed. All the ingredients came together in Foley’s crucible of creativity, including copious quantities of smash-mouth combat, a variety of weapons and gimmicks, some crazy spots, an unthinkable betrayal, and a memorable finish.

The Boiler Room Brawl paved the way for even more out-of-the box meetings between ‘Taker and Mankind in the two years that followed, including the famous—and infamous—Hell in A Cell showdown between the men at King of the Ring 1998. It was also a forerunner to the many unconventional no-DQ and cinematic matches we see today.

Of all the things that have been said about Mick Foley’s unloved child over the past 25 years, it’s surely time to add the word “groundbreaking” to the conversation. Let’s give Mick Foley’s baby some long overdue affection. ■



ILLUSTRATION BY ZOYA BESSLER

RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

AMANDA HUBER SHARED intimate details of **Brodie Lee's** final two months and the desperate life-or-death struggle to save her husband. In an interview with **Aubrey Edwards** on the *AEW Unrestricted* podcast, Huber described how quickly a case of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis settled into Lee's lungs, and how the fight seemed nearly insurmountable from the outset.

Huber explained that Lee had reported to Daily's Place in Jacksonville, Florida, for that night's *Dynamite*, and, although the 6'5", 275-pound star tested negative for COVID-19, AEW's resident physician, **Dr. Michael Sampson**, noted that something didn't seem right and recommended that he return home to quarantine and rest. Lee's

temperature rose to 102.9 degrees, and his wife urged him to visit the hospital. By that time, his oxygen level had decreased to 52. A normal oxygen level is 95 to 100, and a sick patient's level is typically around 85.

Lee was placed under extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO), basically a last-resort procedure that serves as dialysis for the lungs. Commonly, it pulls blood from the patient's leg, the blood travels through a machine for oxygenation, and then the blood is pumped directly to the heart. Seeing her husband in that predicament was quite sobering.

Lee recovered briefly, was taken off the ventilator and the ECMO process, and received a tracheotomy so he could breathe directly through a tube. His wife remembers his bravery

and ill-fated attempts to put her at ease. Said Amanda, "He was able to wake up, and he started communicating with me, and he'd smile, and he'd wink at me, and he'd mouth words to me. He couldn't talk."

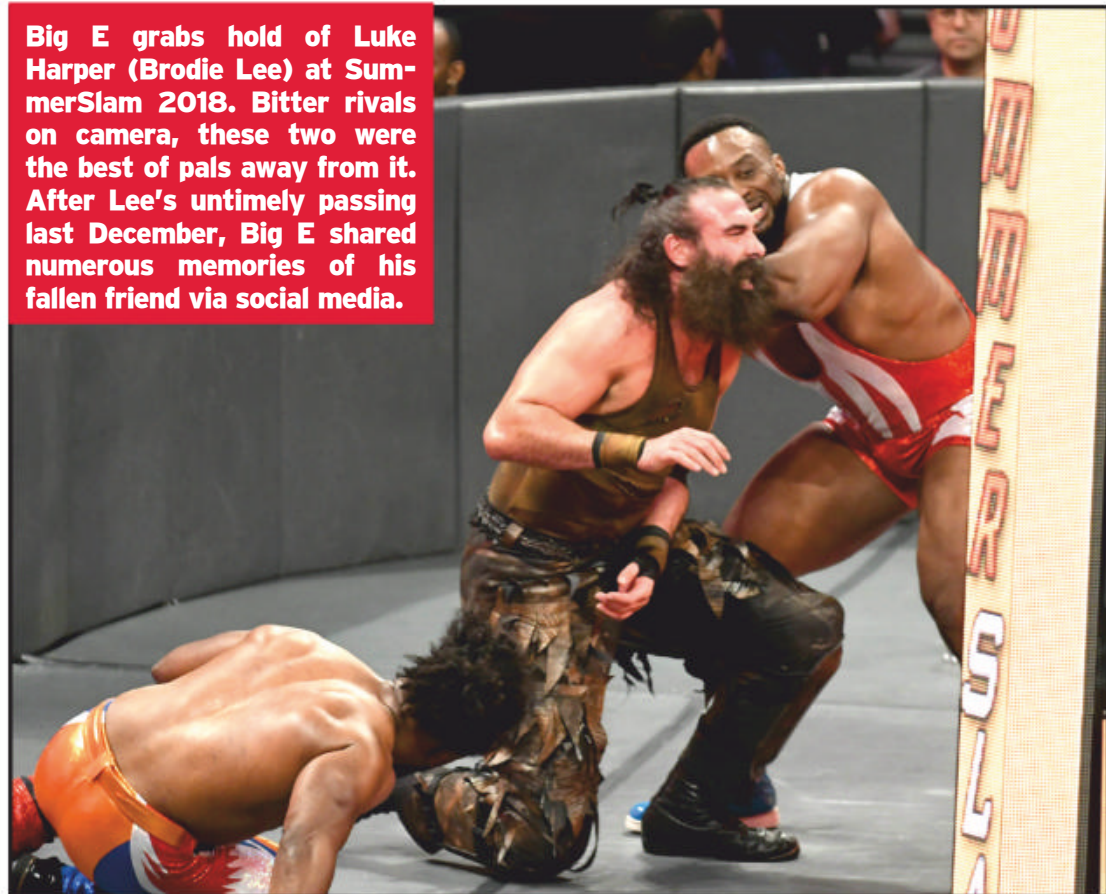
Idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis is a chronic scarring disease, which causes the tissues in the lungs to become thick. The cause is unknown, and the condition is progressive and irreversible.

Huber thanked the wrestling community for rallying around her family. She remembered being awestruck by AEW's tribute show to her husband. She also recounted **Cody Rhodes** and **Big E**—both of whom were good friends with Lee—coming to her side and breaking the news of her husband's death to her eight-year-old son, "Brodie Lee Jr." Other stars, such as **Shawn Spears**, **Tyler Breeze**, and **Peyton Royce**, managed to say their goodbyes to Lee in the hospital.

Brodie Lee made a huge impact on the business, from his early days in CHIKARA and other independents, to making the big time as **Luke Harper** of the Wyatt Family in WWE, to finding a new home in AEW.

Jon Huber died the day after Christmas. He was only 41, and he'll be dearly missed.

Big E grabs hold of Luke Harper (Brodie Lee) at SummerSlam 2018. Bitter rivals on camera, these two were the best of pals away from it. After Lee's untimely passing last December, Big E shared numerous memories of his fallen friend via social media.



WWE Chairman and CEO **Vince McMahon** is surely as proud as a peacock after his latest deal with NBC Universal, worth \$1-billion over the next half-decade, an agreement as lucrative and historic as his billion-dollar deal with Fox two years ago. His groundbreaking WWE Network, which was on the vanguard of the over-the-top media business models that short-circuited cable television and the pay-per-view business, will be absorbed into the Peacock streaming service. Now WWE fans will enjoy more

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



Edge and his on-screen “brother” Christian embrace at the 2021 Royal Rumble. A surprise entrant in the Rumble, Christian would help the #1 entrant eliminate Braun Strowman en route to Edge’s eventual heartfelt win.

options, including classic NBC shows, news, sports, and myriad original programming.

The WWE Network will be a sub-channel on Peacock with all the pay-per-views and exclusive content it’s currently offering. Moreover, Peacock, with 20 million subscribers compared to the Network’s 1.5 million subscribers, is only \$4.99 per month on most systems. Or fans may opt for a slightly more expensive tier in order to keep their viewing commercial-free.

It appears to be a win for NBC Universal, WWE, and the fans. Nevertheless, critics worry that WWE will be more concerned with the quantity of content than the quality of content, and more stable flat-fee revenue will ensure that its product remains stagnant.

How about **Edge’s** stunning victory in the 2021 Royal Rumble? The “Rated-R Superstar” entered at number one and faced archenemy **Randy Orton** to

kick off the match. Amazingly, both men survived until the end of the Rumble, when Edge—after eliminating **Braun Strowman** (with help from long-time tag partner **Christian**) and **Seth Rollins**—overcame Orton’s RKO and tossed “The Viper” over the top rope.

It was Edge’s first match in seven months. It had been one year since he made his surprise comeback at last year’s Royal Rumble. It was his second Rumble victory, having won the event in 2010. And, at 47 years old, he was set to main-event *WrestleMania*.

Congratulations, Edge. You deserve it!

Another deserving winner was **Bianca Belair**, who emerged victorious in the Women’s Royal Rumble. The number-three entrant, Belair overcame **Naomi** and a few close calls before joining with **Rhea Ripley** to eliminate **Charlotte Flair**. Belair and Ripley, the two finalists, nearly eliminated each other, but both agreed to return to the center of the ring for a proper outcome. Belair ended up clotheslining Ripley over the top rope for the biggest win of her career—setting a new record for in-ring time in a Women’s Royal Rumble match, and earning a main-event title shot at *WrestleMania 37*.

In other bouts, Universal champion **Roman Reigns** beat **Kevin Owens** in a Last Man Standing match ... Smackdown Women’s champion **Sasha Banks** forced **Carmella** to submit ... WWE champion **Drew McIntyre** slayed **Bill Goldberg** ... **Shayna Baszler**

& **Nia Jax** regained the Women’s tag team title from Charlotte Flair & **Asuka**.

Kudos to WWE for its Superstar Spectacle, held on India’s Republic Day (the equivalent of the U.S.’s Fourth of July). Emanating from the ThunderDome at St. Petersburg’s Tropicana Field, the event showcased many of the up-and-coming Indian and Indian-American talent from WWE’s developmental ranks in bouts involving Raw, Smackdown, and NXT superstars.

WWE champion Drew McIntyre joined the team of **Indus Sher** to defeat the returning **Jinder Mahal** and his fellow Indian-Canadian grapplers **The Bollywood Boyz**. In other notable matches, Charlotte Flair teamed with California indie standout **Sareena Sandhu** to beat **Bayley** and **Natalya**, **AJ Styles** pinned amateur star **Jeet Rama** (with help from **Omos**), and NXT champion **Finn Balor** beat **Guru Raaj**. **Dilsher Shanky** and **Giant Zanjeer**, both standing nearly seven feet tall, were impressive in tag team action.

COVID-19 continues to take a toll on the industry and its athletes. Although WWE has taken precautions and enforced rigorous testing, its policy has been to avoid mentioning the coronavirus on-air, stressing the desire for an escapist product. While there’s value in that, Drew McIntyre, who tested positive at the start of 2021, took the opportunity to acknowledge his illness and endorse social distancing and the wearing of masks.

Unfortunately, McIntyre was not the only wrestling star to battle the deadly virus in recent months. **Nick Jackson** of **The Young Bucks** acknowledged that he was bedridden for nearly three weeks last September, and that it took several months to regain his cardiovascular fitness, as he relied heavily on brother **Matt**



A tearful Bianca Belair basks in the moment of her Royal Rumble victory. Belair made history by becoming the first Black woman to win a Rumble, as well as the first Black wrestler to win the match since The Rock in 2000.

Jackson to help carry him in tag team matches.

Former AEW World champion **Chris Jericho** revealed on his podcast, *Talk Is Jericho*, that he tested positive for COVID-19 in September, but didn't suffer from severe symptoms.

In late-January, NXT star **Mia Yim** refuted initial false social-media reports of her contracting COVID, but later ended up testing positive anyway. Hopefully she will have recovered by the time you read this. Best wishes, Mia!

While current AEW World champion **Kenny Omega's** alliance with **Don Callis** is a hot issue on *Dynamite*, it's had more of a direct effect on *Impact Wrestling*—both good and bad. The good news is that Omega's first appearance on *Impact*, back on December 8, attracted 221,000 viewers, and, shortly before press time on January 26, the program scored 186,000 viewers.

The downside for *Impact* is that Omega and former Bullet Club members **Karl Anderson** & **Doc Gallows** are dominating the company. At the Hard to Kill event on January 16, Omega, Anderson, and Gallows beat *Impact* champion **Rich Swann**, **Chris Sabin**, and **Moose** in the main event. Add the arrival of **Private Party**, and AEW stars seem to be superior to the *Impact* stars. Apparently, Don Callis is willing to make that tradeoff to achieve higher numbers.

Hopefully, Callis and **Scott D'Amore** won't be so distracted by the AEW angle that they fumble negotiations with Moose. His two-year contract expires in June, but all indications are that Anthem executives want to keep

him in *Impact Wrestling*. I'm a bit concerned that Moose has been portrayed as an entitled under-achiever in recent months. We don't want that storyline to become the perceived reality.

Speaking of Hard to Kill, I want to congratulate **Kiera Hogan** & **Tasha Steelz** on defeating **Havok** & **Nevaeh** in a tournament final for the Knockouts tag team belts, which had been abandoned in 2013. *Impact Wrestling's* women's division is on the cusp of big things.

Indie star **Tony Deppen** certainly impressed me at Ring of Honor's Final Battle 2020. He defeated **Dak Draper**, **Josh Woods**, and **LSG** in a "Four-Corner Survival Match" during the Final Battle pre-show to earn a shot at TV champion **Dragon Lee** later that night. While Deppen came up short in the TV title match, he received rave reviews in the locker room.

Deppen told *Pro Wrestling Torch*: "It was one of those matches where I felt everything clicked the way it needed to click. I got in the back, and they were like, 'You need to talk to **Delirious**,' and I was like, 'Okay.' I went in there, and he was like, 'That was phenomenal.'"

Deppen's performance at Final Battle enabled him to crack the top 10 of our Ring of Honor ratings. By the way, Deppen amazed many but still lost to Synergy champion **Jordan Oliver** in a two-hour Iron Man match in Philadelphia at Game Changer Wrestling's Fight Forever—a 24-hour event to help financially support wrestlers during the pandemic.

I'm sure we'll see more ROH appearances by Deppen in the coming year.

This 'n' that: Freesport will no longer carry *Impact Wrestling* in the U.K., but the program will be made available on YouTube and Facebook ... **Stu Bennett**, known as **Wade Barrett** in WWE, became a naturalized U.S. citizen ... Sasha Banks, who appears on the *Star Wars* series *The Mandalorian*, now has an action figure based on her character, Koska Reeves.

Danny Hodge, one of the sport's all-time greats, passed away on December 24 at age 88. Hodge competed at the Winter Olympics in Oslo, Norway, in 1952, and again in 1956 in Melbourne, Australia, where he won a silver medal in the middleweight division. He appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 1957 before debuting as a pro wrestler two years later.

Hodge, also an accomplished boxer, became the cornerstone of **Leroy McGuirk's** Tri-State Wrestling in Oklahoma and throughout the Mid-South. His excellent standing in the amateur world legitimized his exploits as a seven-time NWA junior heavyweight titlist. Imagine this:



Though he failed to capture the ROH TV title at Final Battle, Tony Deppen certainly captured the attention of Ring of Honor—including booker and producer Delirious.

He actually defeated former NWA World heavyweight champion **Lou Thesz** in a two-out-of-three-falls bout on July 20, 1962.

“Danny wrestled his entire amateur career without being taken off his feet,” Thesz told me with a wry smile back in 2000. “He possessed superhuman tendon strength. He can make applesauce from apples with his bare hands, and, at one time, could bend or break the best-made pliers.”

Hodge was an ambassador for both professional and amateur wrestling long after withdrawing from active competition in the 1970s. Often compared to the Heisman Trophy, the Dan Hodge Trophy was established in 1995 to honor the country’s best

amateur wrestler. In 1996, he received our Stanley Weston Award and was inducted into the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame.

I’d also like to acknowledge the deaths of the legendary **Bobby Davis**, who managed “**Nature Boy**” **Buddy Rogers** in the 1960s (age 83); former GWF star **Steven Dane**, brother of **Scott Casey** and tag team partner of **Chaz Taylor** (age 62); former NFL linebacker and defensive end **Kevin Greene**, whose passion for pro wrestling buoyed him to strong performances against the Four Horsemen, the New World Order, and even **The Giant** (age 58); and “**Polar Bear**” **Paul Varelans**, an MMA specialist who fought **Taz** at ECW’s Hardcore Heaven in 1996 (age 51).

NEWS ANALYSIS

BROKEN HEARTS

One of the most influential books I’ve ever read is *Broken Harts: The Life and Death of Owen Hart*. Martha Hart paints an inspiring picture of her husband, his love of practical jokes, and camaraderie with his friends and family. And she shares gut-wrenching details about the circumstances of his premature death. Somehow, it gets to the essence of living. I recommend this book to Amanda Huber and all of you.

STRUTTING HIS STUFF

Vince McMahon went from focusing on Madison Square Garden’s monthly gate to quarterly pay-per-views, to finding sponsors for his TV shows, to selling his programming to NBC Universal and Fox for guaranteed TV-rights fees, to simply providing content for a platform now available on Peacock. Or, let’s put it this way: He went from selling tickets to you, to selling you to the media conglomerates—not a criticism, just an observation.

STOP “DA MAN”!

Seriously, stop. I’m only a few years younger than Goldberg, and I still get goosebumps when he makes an entrance. The 173-match undefeated streak, the WCW World title reign, the Monday Night War—all this made him a legend. Yet, this pattern of Goldberg showing up, grabbing lucrative main events and then losing in three minutes must end. I believe Goldberg is capable of more. If he wants to collect another hefty payday, he needs to show us.

COMMANDING RESPECT

Isn’t he one of the last ones? It’s very sad to bid farewell to another one of the classic grapplers of the sport, someone who brought authenticity to a craft that became sports entertainment. I mentioned that six-time NWA World champion Lou Thesz respected him, and Lou didn’t pass out respect easily. Bret Hart said he was honored by being in the same room with him. And just ask Oklahoma native Jim Ross what he thinks of Danny Hodge: Be prepared to listen for an hour!

QUICK COUNT

BY AL CASTLE

OSCAR SEASON, FOR me, typically means two things: Getting to watch a bunch of terrific movies at my local cinema, and trying to find ways to tie some of those films' titles into an Academy Award-themed edition of "Quick Count."

While the pandemic may complicate my ability to carry out the first of those missions, I shall not be deterred from the second. The envelope, please ...

NEWS OF THE WORLD

For nearly 40 years now, *The Wrestling Observer* has been the go-to source for fans and insiders hungry to learn more about

the inner workings of the professional wrestling industry.

As the man lifting the curtain for us to get a peek behind it, Dave Meltzer has, at times, been the most beloved figure in the business ... and the most hated. But, whatever your perspective, this much can't be denied: Dave has sacrificed a lot over the last four decades to deliver to us some of the most important wrestling journalism of our time.

Like so many of us, Dave has had a rough go of it as of late. On December 21, his mother, Marilyn, died at the age of 91. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, her funeral services were forced to be held

virtually over Zoom. What's more, the whole episode coincided with Meltzer's son Cody being hospitalized with a serious flare-up of his Crohn's disease.

Despite his personal strife, Meltzer forged ahead. And, on Christmas Day, the latest issue of *The Wrestling Observer* was published. It included a review of WWE's TLC pay-per-view, a preview of Wrestle Kingdom 15, and a tribute to the late Marilyn Meltzer.

She would have been proud.

ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

The May 2, 2011, edition of *Monday Night Raw*, emanating from the American Airlines Arena in Miami, Florida, was notable for several reasons. It featured a "Birthday Bash" for hometown boy Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, who turned 39 that day. John Cena also made his first appearance as a nine-time world champion, having won the title the previous night.

But the most memorable part of the night may have come at the very beginning. As she had done countless times before, Lilian Garcia opened the show

From left to right: Bill Apter, Bryan Alvarez, Dave Meltzer, and Dustin Rhodes enjoy a conversation at 2019's Starrcast event. Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer* has been a constant in the wrestling industry, through thick and thin.



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Clutching the red TNT title belt gifted to him by Tony Khan, Brodie Lee Jr. (aka -1) honors his father's memory in the main event of AEW's December 30 Brodie Lee tribute show.

with her singing of "The Star Spangled Banner." The rendition took on a special significance, as it came one day after news surfaced of the American military raid that resulted in the death of Osama Bin Laden, the man behind the September 11, 2001, terror attacks.

Fans inside the arena quite literally stood united as Americans that night. A decade later, following an incredibly divisive, traumatic 12 months, we hope we can stand united once again.

SOUL

NBC's forthcoming sitcom, *Young Rock*, promises to give a glimpse into the unique childhood of Dwayne Johnson as he grew up in a home regularly occupied by some of the most colorful personalities in wrestling history. But when the first images surfaced from the set of the new show, some older fans were more

excited to see more of another legendary wrestling "Johnson."

With his perfectly coiffed Afro hairstyle, burgundy bell-bottoms, and bulging biceps, actor Joseph Lee Anderson was the spitting image of the Rock's dad, Rocky Johnson. And what an image it is!

Back when The Rock was just a pebble, the "Soul Man" was doing his own trailblazing and crowd-electrifying, all the while trying his best to set an example for his son as a devoted father and husband.

Sadly, the elder Johnson passed in January of last year, meaning that fans would be left with only their memories, and whatever archived footage exists from his wrestling career. And so, many of us will be watching *Young Rock* with a particular interest in the older Rock.

THE FATHER

On the topic of wrestling dads, the sport is still reeling from the

loss of Jon Huber, who passed on December 26.

Wrestling fans knew him best as "Brodie Lee" or "Luke Harper," whose towering dimensions, woolly appearance, and athletic grace was reminiscent of another wrestling icon gone too soon, Frank "Bruiser Brody" Goodish.

But, if we learned anything from AEW's touching tribute show for Huber on December 30, it's that Huber's ultimate legacy won't be his run as WWE Intercontinental or AEW TNT champion, or anything else he accomplished in the ring. It will be the two young sons he left behind, "-1" Brodie Jr. and Nolan.

By all accounts, Huber's passion for pro wrestling was surpassed only by his devotion to his boys. Friends recalled Huber often catching the earliest flight possible after a match to get home to be with his children.

Many a hall-of-famer will tell you that being a great pro wrestler and a great parent are often at odds. Jon Huber found a way to be both, making his passing all the more painful.

NOMADLAND

Harry Smith. Dalton Castle. Ethan Page. Three tremendously talented wrestling stars who have worn championship gold and been featured acts in their respective wrestling promotions in recent years. And, early in 2021, they were all in between jobs.

For various reasons, the trio of recognizable wrestling names all found themselves in free agency. Castle, Smith, and Page, whose respective contracts with ROH, MLW, and Impact lapsed late in 2020, will likely be courted by major promotions throughout the world.

By the time you read this, any of these men could plying their trade just about anywhere . . . or they could still be waiting to make their next move. Wrestling purgatory hasn't been this crowded in a long time. □

THE LOCKUP

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

EVERYTHING OLD IS new again. Last year, *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* got into a bit of a controversy when our intrepid Editor-in-Chief Kevin McElvaney innocently tweeted which wrestling titles were officially recognized as world championships by *PWI*, and opened up a hornet's nest of naysayers defending the merits of the ones we *didn't* recognize. At that time, I personally stuck my neck out to say that I considered the NWA heavyweight crown to be a world title, and even went on the official *This Is the NWA* podcast to precariously try to defend both mine and *PWI's* positions. And now, in this issue, it's come full circle, as *PWI* has announced that, for the first time in 14 years, it will indeed give world title recognition to the venerable National Wrestling Alliance. And, in my estimation, the number-one factor in making the case for the NWA has been the man who holds that title: Nick Aldis.

Since December 9, 2017, Aldis has kept his grip on the oldest world heavyweight championship in the sport, with just a one-month break in which it was kept warm for him by some guy named Cody Rhodes. That's a total of about three-and-a-quarter years, as of press time. On the list of longest-reigning NWA World champions, he's just about to edge out Gene Kiniski, putting him at number six all-time behind only Lou Thesz,

Ric Flair, Harley Race, Dory Funk Jr., and Dan Severn. And, since a champion is only as good as his competition, let's take a look at the list of folks against whom Aldis has successfully defended his prize, which includes the likes of Tommy Dreamer, Colt Cabana, Lance Archer, Flip Gordon, Ken Anderson, Jake Hager, Brian

Cage, Billy Gunn, James Storm, Marty Scurll, Ricky Morton, and Mike Bennett.

Aldis has also proudly brought back the old-school tradition of the traveling world champion—which was always the hallmark of the National Wrestling Alliance, and once made their title stand head-and-shoulders above all others. Rather than simply being the champion of a company, Aldis has taken on challengers across many promotions, including CZW (where he initially won the belt), House of Hardcore, Championship Wrestling from Hollywood, Ring of Honor, WrestleCade, WLW, and United Wrestling Network ... not to mention his own home base on NWA programs *Powerrr* and *Shockwave*. To date, he has defended his gold in 15 different states, plus Puerto Rico, as well



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

At 2018's history-making All In event, Nick Aldis goes to work on a bloody Cody Rhodes. This match—and the subsequent rematch—helped put the NWA World heavyweight title back on the national stage.



Aldis took on rival Mike Bennett on last September's premiere of the weekly *Primetime Live* show. He'd, of course, win the match—continuing his already-impressive reign as NWA champ.

as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and even the People's Republic of China, where he was the first NWA World champion to make an appearance in the 73-year history of the organization.

Despite not having a regular weekly TV platform like some more high-profile world champions do, he has competed for the title at least 20 times in televised/livestreamed matches, including a dozen pay-per-view appearances. Among these were the now-legendary All In show in 2018 that laid the groundwork for All Elite Wrestling, the NWA 70th Anniversary spectacular, and the revival of the Crockett Cup. And, as if all that weren't enough, the guy just *looks* the part in his impeccable suits, with not a hair out of place. He carries himself with the bearing of a world champion, demonstrating the respect he has for the prestige of the domed-globe belt he carries just

as Thesz, Pat O'Connor, Jack Brisco, and even the "Nature Boy" himself did before him.

Now, look, I'm not going to sit here and claim that the NWA of today enjoys the same stature that it did 70, 50, or even 30 years ago. The organization itself is structurally very different than what it was in its heyday. But, contrary to what many casual fans may have believed, it has never gone away. Certainly, the NWA World heavyweight championship no longer enjoys the position as the universally acknowledged supreme prize in the sport that it did during the 1950s through the early-1980s. Other than the five years it spent as the top championship in TNA Wrestling (which some might argue did it more harm than good), the NWA title has spent much of the past quarter-century relatively underground, its history and status safeguarded by the efforts

of enterprising promoters over the years like Dennis Coralluzzo, Howard Brody, David Marquez, and, most recently, Billy Corgan, who bought it outright in 2018 and, without hesitation, chose Aldis as the standard-bearer he would use to help rebuild the brand.

The biggest strike against Aldis as of late has been something completely out of his control—namely, the COVID pandemic. The NWA has been hit hard by the lockdown and its aftereffects, especially since it lacks the kind of resources and platform that, say, WWE and AEW have. In the first six months after the lockdown began, Aldis was unable to defend his title at all, and, at press time, had only defended it four times since last August—the most recent being January 16 against Jaysin Strife for Magnum Pro Wrestling in Omaha, Nebraska (the first NWA World title match in that city in 30 years, by the way.)

Nevertheless, not even the weakening of the NWA's presence during the pandemic has totally halted Aldis' efforts to continue to lift the prestige of the title and remain a fighting champion. Just as the NWA World Women's championship has found a home as of late in AEW, so too has the NWA World heavyweight championship been sought after by promoters—thanks in part to the value it has gained since Aldis has been carrying it. Some have even speculated that the new working relationship between the NWA and AEW could lead to Aldis at some point showing his face on *Dynamite*, and maybe even landing that much-discussed rubber match with Rhodes.

For years, fans and insiders alike have debated the question: Does the title make the holder, or does the holder make the title? I would argue that Nick Aldis is a prime example of the latter. And his recognition is long overdue. □

WIN, LOSE, or DRAW

BY HARRY BURKETT

DURING A RECENT broadcast of SiriusXM's *Busted Open*, Bully Ray shared a story about Arn Anderson, who had worked as an agent during The Dudley Boyz' WWE heyday. The Dudleys were facing William Regal and Lance Storm. Anderson thought Regal hitting Ray with a running knee was a sufficient finish. "Damn, Buh Buh, if a man runs at you and kicks you in the head with his knee, you're gonna get knocked out," reasoned Anderson.

Bully recalled bristling at the idea. That might have worked in a previous generation, but, in an era when superstars possess almost superhuman resilience, he thought that finish would make him look extraordinarily weak.

With this anecdote, Bully didn't intend to criticize Anderson, but wanted to point out that insiders could view professional wrestling quite differently.

I'm from the Anderson school of thought because I like matches to come off as realistic as possible. I love the Johnny Valentine quote: "I can't make them believe wrestling is real, but I can make them believe *I'm* real."

Maybe I was conditioned by the in-ring style of the early-1980s, just before the "Rock 'n' Wrestling Connection" stretched the limits of credulity, to make assumptions about what a "real" match is supposed to look like. But, even at 10 years old, I had plotted out

my route to the world championship by resolving that I would *not* bounce back off the ropes like all the other guys. If tossed into the ropes, I would simply hang on for dear life. I could probably beat Ricky Steamboat if he missed a dropkick at just the right time.

Ted DiBiase once shared his philosophy with me. "Anybody that's been in a real fight can watch wrestling for 10 minutes and realize, *Wait a minute ... That guy grabbed his opponent by the hair of the head and ran him across the ring ... now, you can't really do that.* I have this guy in a headlock and I shoot him across to the ropes. Why did he go? Can you really shoot a guy off the ropes? But here's the thing: My attitude was, *I'm gonna convince the crowd, if they think every other*

match on the card is phony, that my match was a real fight."

The "Million-Dollar Man" achieved that by being a great worker, using the same tools as everyone else, but with intensity, logic, and precision. Locking up and grappling was the glue that added credibility to the less realistic aspects. Pro wrestling doesn't need to look like a bloody alley brawl to give the feel of a competitive sport.

So, why do I bring up the topic of "realism" now? Since the premiere of *AEW Dynamite* 18 months ago, I've heard the issue raised with increasing frequency. While Cody Rhodes promised a sports-based product with wins and losses that mattered, AEW has evolved into more of a tongue-in-cheek presentation, especially its high-spot tag team matches that often lack logic and feature wrestlers with incredible recuperative powers. But should I argue with success? The Young Bucks, Private Party, Best Friends, Jurassic Express, and The Hybrid 2 are among AEW's most popular acts. And *Dynamite* beats *NXT* among younger viewers each week.

As I was conditioned to accept a certain product nearly 40 years ago, perhaps Marvel Comics action movies and the cosplay movement have conditioned



Wheeler YUTA and Tracy Williams square off in a "Pure Rules" tag match at Final Battle 2020. In ROH Pure matches, the first use of a closed-fist punch merits a warning, while the second results in a DQ—a rule Harry Burkett applauds.

PHOTO BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS



In the finals of MLW's Opera Cup tourney, "Filthy" Tom Lawlor takes down Low Ki. Lawlor's legit MMA background lends additional credibility to much of his offense.

this generation of fans differently. Perhaps it's not so much about a suspension of disbelief, but the thrill of a visual spectacle.

Isn't the thrill the same, whether you're watching Spider-Man or Scorpio Sky? Iron Man or Pac? I'll even give a nod to the DC Universe: Wonder Woman or Hikaru Shida?

And yet, this style frustrates purists. FTR's Dax Harwood and Cash Wheeler legitimately believe their core mission in AEW is to help the tag team division develop a more credible in-ring style.

No surprise, I agree with FTR. Whenever I see two competitors literally running in opposite directions to bounce off the ropes, I wonder what I'm watching. I'm still hung up on the concept of "wrestling," which Merriam-Webster defines as "a sport or contest in which two unarmed individuals struggle hand to hand with each attempting to subdue or unbalance the other."

I know, I have romanticized notions of Karl Gotch humbling young upstarts in his dojo, Billy Robinson separating shoulders in Wigan's "Snake Pit," Stu Hart eliciting screams in the Dungeon, Hiro Matsuda snapping legs down in Florida, and Dory Funk Jr. forcing his students to do 30

continuous revolutions of his spinning toehold.

Those images make me respect New Japan's Young Lions all the more.

I'm encouraged that mat grappling is making a comeback. A prime example is Ring of Honor's resurrection of the Pure title last August. Consider the stipulations for ROH's Pure matches: More than one closed fist will get a competitor disqualified, and the Pure title can change hands on a countout or disqualification.

I must also give a shout-out to "Filthy" Tom Lawlor, who has emerged as a modern-day version of the late, great Danny Hodge. He exhibited terrific mat grappling against Rocky Romero for *New Japan STRONG* and again in the opening round of Major League Wrestling's 2020 Opera Cup. He went on to defeat Low Ki in the excellent tournament final.

Thumbs up to MLW for that concept. The "opera cup" was a common prize throughout North America from roughly 1915 through the mid-1940s, when matches were often held at opera houses, which ran everything from plays and concerts to movies and pro wrestling. Stu Hart was the last notable winner of an "opera cup"

back in 1948, and the Hart family dusted off Stu's actual cup and donated it to MLW for what has become an annual event. Too bad Davey Boy Smith Jr. lost to Low Ki in the first round this year.

ROH, particularly with its Pure division, and MLW, with its hybrid, fusion-of-styles philosophy, present very realistic wrestling exhibitions. Non-wrestling fans seeing these clips on YouTube would probably think these matches are completely legit. Lawlor demonstrates that MMA has exerted a positive influence on pro wrestling. The Undertaker's evolving style—incorporating MMA-style strikes and the triangle choke over the years—is also proof of that.

Sometimes, ROH and MLW are criticized for their lack of compelling angles. I view it differently: Elaborate storylines quickly evolve into unbelievable storylines. Emphasizing personalities, factions, and the pursuit of championships—and not gimmicky storylines—enhances the sports-feel of both promotions. The matches aren't mere devices to tell a story; the matches *are* the story.

Don't get me started on WWE. I won't include NXT in this rant because there are too many technically great matches at NXT events (nearly any bout involving Johnny Gargano or Kyle O'Reilly, for example). I also understand WWE has the best mat grapplers in the world, from Daniel Bryan and Dolph Ziggler to Shelton Benjamin and Chad Gable. Even those you wouldn't expect, such as Big E and Otis, have impressive amateur backgrounds.

Vince McMahon knows that amateur-style mat grappling doesn't sell tickets to the masses. That's why the Gagne family isn't running the wrestling business. So, if I must endure Randy Orton setting a human being on fire to sustain a company that will also produce Tommaso Ciampa vs. Timothy Thatcher, I'm willing to pay that price. □

HOTSEAT

AN INCISIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE SPORT'S TOP STARS AND FIGURES



**ADAM
PEARCE**

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PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ARE filled with stories of ordinary players who went on to become extraordinary coaches. As a tight end with the Wesleyan University football team in 1971, Bill Belichick couldn't earn a starting position, and later decided to play lacrosse instead. He went on to win six Super Bowl rings as head coach of the New England Patriots. And then there's the story of Adam Pearce. Over his 18-year ring career, "Scrap Iron" never rose to the top of a major wrestling league. He was best known as a mid-card performer during Ring of Honor's early years, and as the face of the scaled-down National Wrestling Alliance in the post-TNA era. His only appearances on WWE TV were as a preliminary enhancement talent in the late-1990s.

But while achieving modest success in the ring, Pearce was learning important lessons that would help him thrive in his next act—as a backstage coach.

After taking over booking responsibilities from Gabe Sapolsky in 2008, Pearce emphasized the importance of storytelling and production value in Ring of Honor, and set it on a path toward long-term success. After seeing what he had to offer as a guest coach, WWE recruited Pearce as a trainer and producer in 2015. He went on to help craft some of the most memorable WWE matches in recent years, including the NXT championship clash between Charlotte and Rhea Ripley at WrestleMania 36.

But, just when it seemed that Pearce's wrestling legacy was destined to be away from the cameras, "Scrap Daddy" (as he was once known) found himself in front of them once again, as WWE's latest on-screen authority figure. So well did Pearce perform in the role, that, before long, he found himself embroiled in a storyline—and even a televised match—with possibly the sport's biggest star, Roman Reigns.

Now retired from active competition for seven years, the 42-year-old Pearce is enjoying, arguably, the most notoriety of his career. He recently spoke about his unlikely run as a WWE star with **PWI** Senior Writer Al Castle.



During their memorable 2008 feud over the NWA title, Adam Pearce bashes Brent Albright. Long before he was an onscreen authority figure, "Scrap Daddy" Pearce ranked among the most respected technical wrestlers in the U.S.

Castle: Just before I got on with you, I looked up the interview that we did 11 years ago for the magazine. I got a kick out of the opening line. It said, "Adam Pearce has gone from losing opening card matches in Ring of Honor to becoming one of the most influential and respected personalities in the sport of wrestling. And yet, many fans may never have heard of him."

Pearce: I think this goes to show that the old adage, "The more things change, the more things stay the same," is exactly true. That is hilarious. You could literally cut and paste that and use it today. It's pretty incredible. It's been a heck of a journey.

Castle: The thing that struck me about that interview was when you were talking about how you

ended up as the creative head of Ring of Honor. You said you couldn't help but stick your nose in—that you had to be the one to speak up. Did some of that happen again, all these years later, in WWE?

Pearce: I certainly think there's some semblance of truth to that. When I was hired in 2015, that was strictly as a coach at the Performance Center. And then, along with those duties came, "Hey, we noticed you did some TV at Ring of Honor." And the process at NXT, at that point, was virtually identical to what I was used to. So, in a lot of ways, me sliding into the Performance Center in NXT in 2015 was like putting on a glove. It was

a perfect fit at the perfect time for me. And it allowed me to use the skills that I had built up in both

Ring of Honor and Championship Wrestling from Hollywood on the television side to say hello to a new group of guys that had no idea that I had those skills. I'm grateful to have an opinion that people want to hear. Sometimes, that has an impact on the shows, and sometimes it doesn't. But just to be involved, I think, is probably one of the bigger honors. I get so much more gratification out of that than I ever did winning a match, if that makes any sense.

Castle: Is there any bit of you that is resentful for the fact that you get this opportunity *now*? Is there any resentment about not getting this break 10 or 15 years ago?

Pearce: Here's where I give you the sound bite that nobody believes: there isn't one shred of resentment about any part of my journey. The cool thing about my career is that everything that I've been able to do has all been by choice. I have literally done everything I've set out to do in professional wrestling and sports

The last time PWI's Al Castle spoke to Pearce, he'd gone from near-obscurity to the top of the independent circuit—a sudden rise to prominence not unlike his most recent work on WWE TV.





Adam Pearce unwittingly pins Shinsuke Nakamura, after both men were left dazed by Roman Reigns—a clever ploy by “The Tribal Chief” to defend his title against the retired Pearce at the Royal Rumble.

entertainment—and on my own calendar. I worked for myself for two decades, which is pretty incredible. I could satisfy my economic needs in pro wrestling on my own without any mainstream machine behind me. But, once I got to a point where I needed to make a change—because I had a family, and I had children, and it was time to grow up—I was well versed enough in the facets of our industry over that two decade period ... my toolbox was full enough that I could come into WWE and work on things and be a part of that machine shop, if you will. Someone just asked me this the other day. I think the way they phrased it was, “Well, this is probably not the way you envisioned being a part of the TV shows in WWE.” And I didn’t take it as a backhanded compliment or even insulting in any way. I said, “This is exactly how I saw myself being a part of this going forward.” Because I didn’t, and don’t, have the physical stature that a lot of these guys do. I was just very realistic along the journey with what I was capable of. And listen, there’s a ton of locker rooms on the independent scene where I was the best wrestler in the room. And there were a ton of locker rooms on the independent scene where I wasn’t. And I always figured that my real value was going

to be behind the camera, behind the curtain, coaching, that kind of thing. That’s the future I saw for myself. I just knew that I could obtain something different and end up in the same spot. Never did I dream I would be standing in the main event of *Smackdown Live* on Fox with Roman Reigns. But that just happened.

Castle: Did you ever deal with any issues of pushback from WWE superstars, maybe younger ones not as familiar with your body of work, sort of questioning your credibility? “Who are you to give me advice? You never made it to the show.” That kind of thing?

Pearce: I was afraid of that when I got hired. That’s one of the things that I felt I would run into a lot. And what I ended up finding was the opposite. And I think the reason that I did is because so many of the wrestlers from that younger generation, who may not have been as familiar with me, what they really did admire was your Daniel Bryans, Cesaros, CM Punks, and the like. And it wasn’t six degrees of separation. It was one

degree of separation, because I shared locker rooms with all those guys. And I can’t tell you how impactful it can be when you come into a camp, and there’s a Jerry Brisco, who everybody’s been conditioned to really respect—and rightfully so. There’s a reason I call him “Dad.” But, when people like Jerry Brisco—and it happened today—when they run up to you in the P.C. and they give you a hug ... When you earn the respect of your peers, even if someone isn’t familiar with you specifically, they get acquainted really quick.

Castle: Have you felt any resentment, or even just your own uneasiness, over all the praise you’ve gotten? You only became a TV character, sort of accidentally, in the last several months. And, almost from day one, you were being praised as one of the best characters on television and one of the best talkers. Is there any bit of you that gets self-conscious over that?

Pearce: I want to be careful how I answer this because I don’t want to come off sounding smug or arrogant. I’m very confident in my body of work, and the tools that I’ve been able to put in my toolbox for over a

Since 2015, the former NWA champion has worked behind the scenes with WWE talent to help hone their craft. Pearce always knew that he wanted to end up in a coaching role once his in-ring days were through.



quarter-century now. Which makes me feel really old. So, I've never doubted myself. I've never gone into a situation, or been given a task, or asked if I could pull something off that I didn't think I could. And, going a step further, if there was something I really didn't think I would do well, I would suggest somebody who I thought was better for the role. That's part of being honest about what you have, what you can do, and, more importantly, what you can't. So, you know, I guess the only cold feet that I've had is what I said to Roman last week before we went out there. I said, "Hey, I just want to apologize. It's been a while since I've thrown a right hand. So, this one might be in there a little tighter than you're used to." And he said, "As long as you don't knock out my pearly whites, we're good."

Castle: I saw some of what you posted on Facebook over the last few weeks after they put you in this program. You seemed really gratified by the reaction. Were you surprised? There were absolutely those folks who were like, "What is Adam Pearce doing in this program? Adam Pearce vs. Roman Reigns?" And then there were a whole bunch of other people who were like, "This is great.



Pearce and Matt Bloom (Albert/Giant Bernard) help produce a live NXT event. Pearce says his experiences producing television for Ring of Honor have served him well in WWE.

I can't wait to see Adam back in the ring."

Pearce: You can mark me down in the first column. When it was first broached, it was like a big, "What?" I haven't been shy about the fact that I had zero interest in being a full-time wrestler ever again in my life. Zero. Less than zero. And maybe that's why it's so much fun. Everything that's happening and has happened to this point has been the proverbial icing on the cake. I'm having the time of my life doing this now, mostly because I don't have to do it to make a living

anymore. And it's really gratifying to be in there with the very best in our profession, whether you're talking about Roman or whether you're talking about Paul Heyman. On the Raw side, I had some interactions with Randy Orton not too long ago that could have gone (and may still go) somewhere further. This is the cream of the crop,

man. And I get to ply my trade, match wits, and clang swords with these guys. I never thought that was going to happen. So, whatever ends up happening, it's the perfect coming around, full circle.

Castle: Another reason why this whole ride has kind of been unlikely is that a lot of fans thought they had seen enough of the authority figure. Now, I don't think they've ever called you anything other than a "WWE official." But, whether it's Vince McMahon, or Eric Bischoff, or every other incarnation we've seen, there's a feeling that this has been done to death. And yet, the reviews have largely been good. There's a feeling that you've put a new twist on it. What was your approach in taking on this role?

Pearce: I think, first of all, from a personal standpoint, it's a departure from some of the characters you mentioned. I think, largely, the authority figure role—in recent years especially—has been that of someone who looks down their nose. They're the establishment. They're the overarching controller of everything, who doesn't hesitate to put their foot on the throat of everyone under them. And I'm



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"Scrap Iron" Adam Pearce poses with the "Ten Pounds Of Gold" in the summer of 2008. His reputation as a "worker's worker" has certainly lent him credibility in his interactions with WWE talent.

really the opposite of that. I am a "WWE official." I am not a general manager. There are no general managers. I don't have, necessarily, the power that would be as absolute as it has been in the past. And, perhaps because of that, I'm not as corrupted by that power. So, I've always tried to play it as straight as I can and to be as impartial as I can, given what the marching orders are. And I think that, in and of itself, is so different, from an attitudinal standpoint, from what people are used to from this kind of character. It doesn't feel the same, because it isn't. And I think that allows me a latitude to take this wherever it goes organically on its own, as opposed to being driven by what might be on paper.

Castle: The other thing that makes this all so strange is that you couldn't have predicted that this run would come in front of a bunch of digital screens with hundreds of virtual fans. Does it offset how awesome this is that it's basically in front of empty arenas?

Pearce: Actually, I look at it the opposite way. I could be wrong, but I have the impression that, if there were live human beings in the seats, especially live human beings conditioned and used to the WWE product over a substantial amount of time, I don't know that "WWE Official Adam Pearce" would have even gotten a chance to get as far as he has gotten. I think anytime you see an authority figure, you're used to expecting a certain typecast that you want to boo immediately. And I think, if there were real human beings in the

seats, that's exactly what would have happened. I don't know if that automatically pushes you in a direction to make it feel like the same old, same old WWE authority figure. Or if you push away from it and go, "Maybe we don't want to do this." I do think the intention was to have a respectable authority that can make reasonable decisions on the

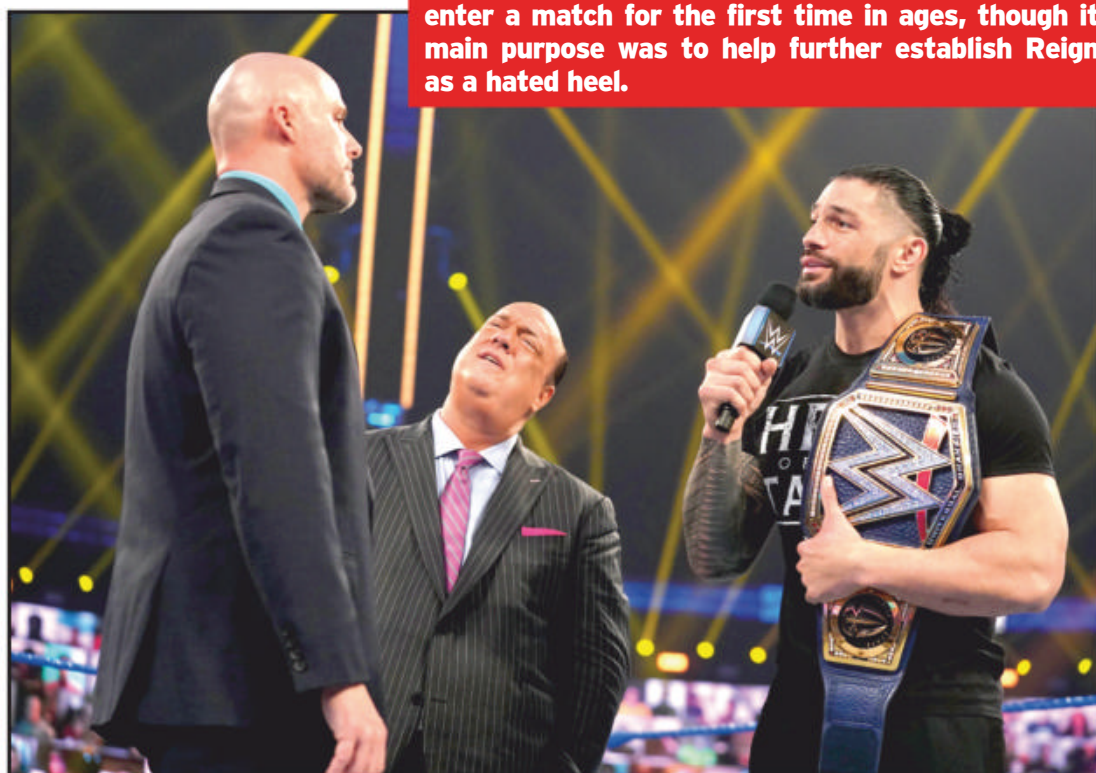
show. You don't necessarily want that person to be good or bad. You just want them to make the right choice, given the situation. And I don't know, if there were real fans in the seats, that they would have given me the opportunity to do that, whether we scripted it or not.

Castle: Is there an authority figure over the years that you drew inspiration from? Maybe Jack Tunney?

Pearce: Ding ding ding! Yeah, Jack Tunney was my WWF president. For people my age, that was it. Gorilla Monsoon, I guess, could be another one. I always appreciate someone like NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue or Green Bay Packers general manager Ron Wolf. A straight-shooter. Cut to the chase. Make the best decision as fast as you can, as impartial as you can.

Castle: For so long, you were kind of the face of the NWA in one of its many incarnations. Now, you've seen what Billy Corgan has done with it over the last couple years. There was a lot of praise for NWA *Powerrr*, before they were derailed by the pandemic. As an observer and

In January 2021, the rivalry between Adam Pearce and Roman Reigns became the unlikely focal point of weekly *Smackdown* broadcasts. The feud saw Pearce enter a match for the first time in ages, though its main purpose was to help further establish Reigns as a hated heel.



someone who values the lineage of the NWA title, what do you make of it?

Pearce: The pandemic, I think, derailed the momentum, not just for WWE or the NWA, but I think for the industry as a whole. This has forced everybody to either adapt or put things aside. And I think, unfortunately, for a lot of my friends that were working with the NWA, they kind of shelved everything. So, it's interesting to see what will happen as the world returns to a more normal state of affairs. But I don't think I am working where I am today without Ring of Honor, which

allowed me to first be an executive producer, or the NWA, which put me at the top of the mountain as a talent. I wish everybody the best. I've got so many friends, and people that I've come across over the last 25 years, that work in all these various places. And everyone has been impacted in one way or another.

Castle: You had your own experience dealing with COVID-19. Can you talk a bit about that? What, if any, lessons did you take away?

Pearce: I got sick at the end of June. I found out on my 42nd birthday. Happy Birthday to me. And I feel fortunate, looking back now. I did get sick. And it was awful for about a week. But I recovered, and my family had varying degrees of COVID illness. And I don't know what I could have done in that time to have prevented it. I think that the company has done a wonderful job along the way of adapting to and changing our policies when they needed to. The entire world didn't have any breadth of experience with this thing, because it was brand new. Everyone has had to adjust and react in real time. And I think we've done a really good job doing that. Most of that, in my opinion, comes from having personal accountability. If you know that a communicable disease is out there, and you don't want to put somebody at risk, then you don't undertake those kinds of things that are going to put you in a position to do just that. Thankfully, I like the house that I bought, because I have been living in this thing and looking at these walls for pretty much a year. And it still didn't prevent me from getting sick.

I'm just thankful that I didn't get anybody else sick.

Castle: How do you feel about WWE in 2021? I know that there's hopes of putting some butts in seats at WrestleMania.

Pearce: I would love for that to happen. I think the magic of sports entertainment—or professional wrestling, whichever way you want to term it—isn't so much what happens in the ring, as much as what the people outside the ring do with their reactions to it. And, for an entire year, that's been missing. And we've had to try to replicate it or manufacture it in a way so that it feels natural. And I'm not certain anyone has done that. There are times where I'll be watching something, whether live or on TV, and I go, "Man, that sounds good." But I know that it's inauthentic, and it doesn't feel like it would have if this place was full. It's going to look weird in 10 years, when you're looking at these retrospective video packages and you're going to see snapshots of LED boards and faces on screens, and it's not going to match everything else. Yeah, I just hope that, going forward, we see less LED boards, and more human eyes reacting to what the superstars are doing in the ring.

Castle: Does it become more important to do that because there's the possibility of you having your own WrestleMania moment this year?

Pearce: What is this bizarre world we're living in? That would be hilarious. That would certainly be on the list of things I never imagined for myself. You resign yourself to a certain fate when you decide that you're going to put your boots away, and you're going to step into another role, whether you want that other role or not. That closes the door, you know? At least, you think it does ... until it doesn't. □

PHOTO BY TIM WALKER



This is the earliest photo of Adam Pearce in the PWI archives, taken back in 1998. Pearce insists he's already done everything he set out to do as a young grappler ... and everything else is just gravy.

SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION:
WORLD WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT
DATE: 01.31.21
LOCATION: ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

TEXT BY KRISTEN ASHLY
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THE 2021 ROYAL Rumble was the 34th occurrence of the annual event, one of the “Big Four” pay-per-views WWE runs each year. The event is, of course, named after the celebrated Royal Rumble match: a battle royal with 30 entrants who enter the match at 90-second intervals. For the 34th Royal Rumble, the pre-show held one championship match, while the main show featured a lineup of five matches—a Women’s Royal Rumble match, a Men’s Royal Rumble match, and three championship fights.

NIA JAX AND SHAYNA BASZLER VS. ASUKA AND CHARLOTTE FLAIR

Back in August at Payback, Nia Jax & Shayna Baszler captured the WWE Women’s tag team championship from Sasha Banks & Bayley, who, by that time, already had a faltering friendship. After becoming the new champs, Jax and Baszler defended the title three times

before losing to Asuka & Charlotte Flair. This match was, essentially, their guaranteed rematch for the tag belts.

Sculpted around two ad hoc teams, this pre-show match came down to which team would work together the best to win the titles. Jax and Baszler placed heavy focus on Asuka during the majority of the match, making her unable to tag in her partner. Flair finally entered the match fired up, but even Natural Selection couldn’t put Baszler down long enough for the pin.

Toward the end of the match, Ric Flair and Lacey Evans arrived ringside to further a storyline between them and Ric’s daughter, Charlotte. Evans pulled Charlotte out of a Figure-Eight once, preventing a win. As his daughter held another Figure-Eight, Ric Flair handed Evans something heavy—possibly brass knuckles—and Evans hit the champ with the Women’s Right, knocking her out. Jax capitalized and got the pin on Flair for the win.

DREW MCINTYRE VS. GOLDBERG

On the special “Legends Night” episode of *Raw* on January 4, Drew McIntyre retained his WWE Championship against Keith Lee.



This year’s Royal Rumble matches were won by Bianca Belair (above) and Edge (right), each of whom were granted their choice of championship match at WrestleMania 37.





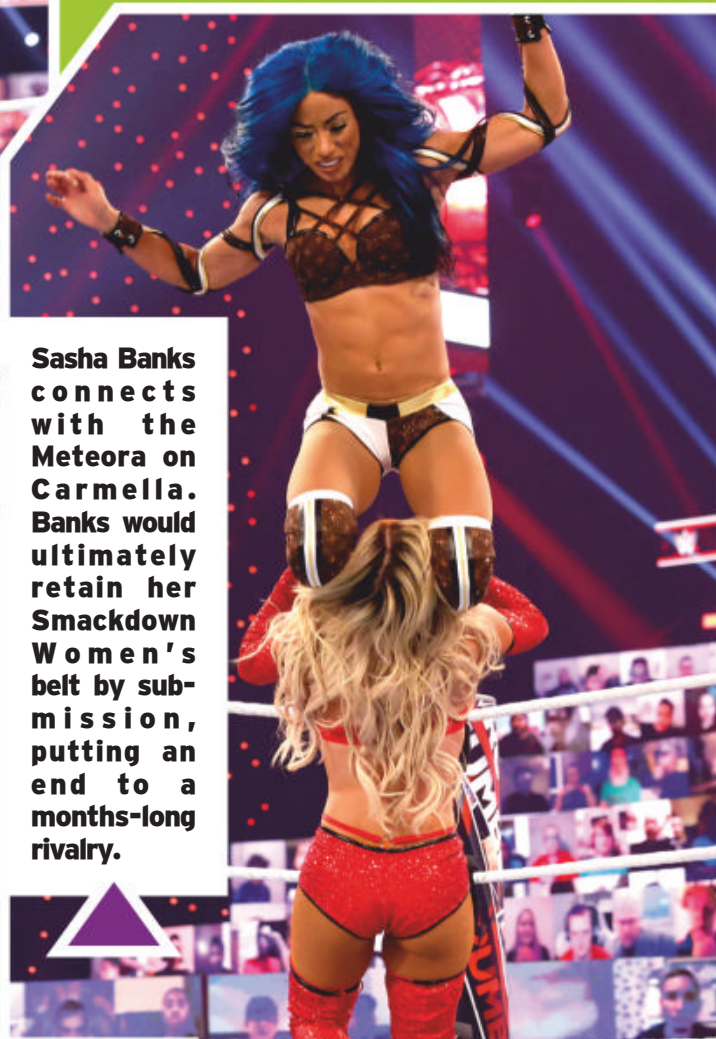
After a quick and decisive loss to Drew McIntyre, Goldberg shows his respect for the WWE champion.

After the match, WWE Hall-of-Famer Goldberg appeared for the first time in nearly a year, praising McIntyre for his talent and skill, while also calling him disrespectful to WWE legends—claiming McIntyre referred to them as “washed up” and felt superior to the champions of the past. Goldberg issued a challenge for the WWE championship. The following week, the Ayr, Scotland, native finally accepted his challenge.

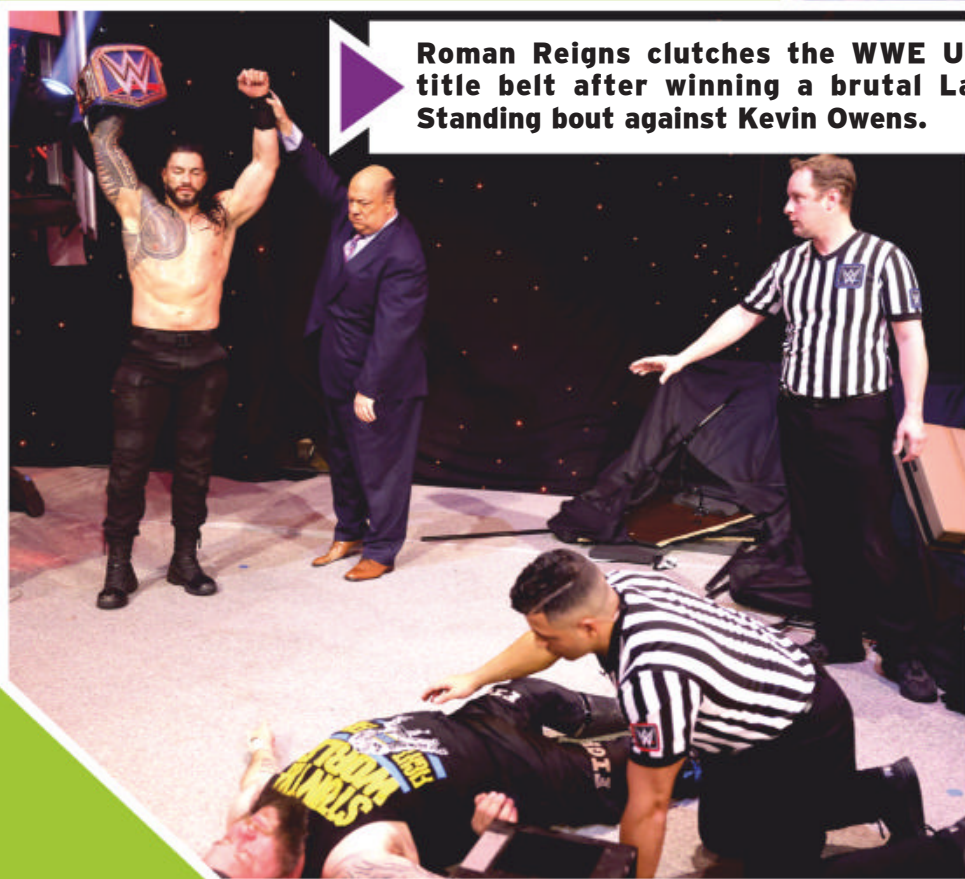
Before the bell officially rang, McIntyre started strong with a headbutt to Goldberg, who

answered by knocking his opponent through a barricade with a spear. When the bell finally rang, Goldberg attempted several spears, and hit McIntyre with a shaky Jackhammer. Though Goldberg kicked out of several pin attempts, McIntyre was finally able to land a Claymore Kick and pin him to retain the belt.

After the match, the two Superstars hugged, and Goldberg told McIntyre he



Sasha Banks connects with the Meteora on Carmella. Banks would ultimately retain her Smackdown Women's belt by submission, putting an end to a months-long rivalry.



Roman Reigns clutches the WWE Universal title belt after winning a brutal Last Man Standing bout against Kevin Owens.

“passed the test.” What test that is, we’re not quite sure.

SASHA BANKS VS. CARMELLA

At December’s TLC event, Sasha Banks retained her Smackdown Women’s championship against challenger Carmella. On the next few episodes of *Smackdown*, Carmella found new ways to annoy Banks, all the while asking for a rematch. Banks finally

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Standout performers in the 2021 Women's Royal Rumble included two-time Smackdown Women's champ Naomi (left), and Billie Kay (above), who, while not exactly dominant, amused with her ringside antics.



agreed to the rematch, under one condition: that she would be allowed to face Carmella's personal sommelier, Reginald, in a match first. The champ's wish was granted. Banks handily defeated Reginald, then kept her promise to give Carmella a rematch for the title.

As is tradition during large WWE pay-per-views, both women came out looking strong with new gear and fierce attitudes. Carmella started the match with an excessive amount of trash talking, and even responded to the piped-in heat chants of "You suck!" During the match, Reginald predictably tried to interfere, but Banks responded by landing a hurricanrana. The referee promptly ejected the humiliated sommelier from ringside for the remainder of the bout. In one particularly scary spot, Carmella flew over the ropes to land on Sasha—in fact, flew a little too far—and landed mostly on her own face.

After an emotional match, Banks finally got Carmella in the Banks Statement, forcing the tap-out and securing her Smackdown Women's championship reign.

WOMEN'S ROYAL RUMBLE MATCH

A total of 30 women participated in the fourth instance of the Women's Royal Rumble match. The first Women's Royal Rumble occurred in 2018, and was won by Asuka. In the following two Women's Rumble matches in 2019 and 2020, Becky Lynch and Charlotte Flair were the winners, respectively.

The 2021 edition turned out to be an incredible match, with many highlights throughout. Bayley and Naomi started the Rumble as the #1

and #2 spots, with the #30 spot already revealed to be Natalya on *WWE Backstage* the night before. Bianca Belair entered at #3, and immediately attempted to eliminate her rival, Bayley. Billie Kay, who arrived at #4, started the match at the commentators' table, leaping out of her chair and arriving on the ramp to appeal to each woman who entered the Rumble, hoping for a partner in crime. Kay eventually teamed up with surprise guest



Lacey Evans enters the Rumble in Charlotte Flair's purple robe. During the Rumble pre-show, she had cost Flair and Asuka the WWE Women's tag belts.

RESULTS

- ▶ **Nia Jax and Shayna Baszler defeated Asuka and Charlotte Flair to win the WWE Women's tag team championship in 10:30.**
- ▶ **Drew McIntyre defeated Goldberg to retain the WWE championship in 2:32.**
- ▶ **Sasha Banks defeated Carmella to retain the Smackdown Women's championship in 10:25.**
- ▶ **Bianca Belair won the Women's Royal Rumble (and a WrestleMania title shot) by last eliminating Rhea Ripley at 58:50.**
- ▶ **Roman Reigns defeated Kevin Owens to retain the WWE Universal championship in 24:54.**
- ▶ **Edge won the Men's Royal Rumble (and a WrestleMania title shot) by last eliminating Randy Orton at 1:00:32.**

entrant Jillian Hall—a pairing dubbed “Jillie Billie”—but Kay eliminated Hall after turning on her. Fans were treated to a brief reunion of The Iiconics when Peyton Royce and Kay teamed up together during the match.

Other exciting moments included Belair and Naomi showing their strength and ability to work together against the competition, and surprise appearances from WWE legends (and former Women's champions) Alicia Fox and Victoria.

The last three remaining wrestlers were Rhea Ripley, Charlotte Flair, and Belair. After working with Ripley to remove Flair, Belair ultimately threw her over the top rope to become the 2021 Women's Royal Rumble winner. With the win, Belair was granted the opportunity to choose which women's title she would like to challenge for in a main-event match at WrestleMania. And she also set a new record for longest time in a Women's Rumble match, lasting nearly 57 minutes.

ROMAN REIGNS VS. KEVIN OWENS

Roman Reigns injured Kevin Owens after Owens defeated Jey Uso in a singles match on the New Year's episode of *Smackdown*. With Owens gone, the WWE Universal champion—with the help of his manager Paul Heyman—spent the next few weeks taunting WWE official Adam Pearce, even angling to battle Pearce for the title at Royal Rumble.

During the contract signing for that



▶ **The Women's Rumble featured its share of surprise entrants, including Torrie Wilson (left, clotheslining Charlotte Flair) and Alicia Fox (right), who actually managed to pin R-Truth for the 24/7 title during the Rumble match.**

SUPERCARDS 2021

► This was a breakout evening for Rhea Ripley and Bianca Belair, who both fought valiantly to be the Rumble winner. Ultimately, it was Belair who'd prevail.



match, the stipulation was added to make it a Last Man Standing bout. While leaving the ring, Pearce limped away on an "injured knee," stating he'd chosen Kevin Owens to be his replacement for the title match.

The match, which mostly took place outside the ThunderDome in the backstage rehearsal area, was a brutal bout right from the start. The usual high-impact spots occurred—Reigns threw Owens off the side of the ThunderDome onto an equipment table, and Owens went after Reigns' knees throughout the affair. The most memorable moments (and not all too common) were when Reigns ran over Owens with a golf cart, and Owens responded by performing a

Swanton Bomb from a pallet positioned atop a forklift, landing on Reigns and a table below.

Back in the ThunderDome, Owens handcuffed Reigns to a rigging, low enough where Reigns couldn't stand to save himself from the 10-count. "The Tribal Chief" sagely grabbed the official and threw him into the steel behind him, knocking him out instantly. Heyman rescued Reigns from the rigging, after what seemed like far more than 10 seconds of struggle, and the champ quickly ended the bout by putting Owens into a guillotine until he passed out.

MEN'S ROYAL RUMBLE MATCH

The 2021 Men's Royal Rumble marked the 34th edition of the annual bout. Last



► Early in the Men's Rumble match, Edge incapacitates friend-turned-enemy Randy Orton with the Edgecution on the announce table. Orton would spend most of the match backstage before returning to the ring in its final moments.

year, Drew McIntyre won the Men's Royal Rumble match, going on to challenge Brock

ROYAL RUMBLE IRONMEN & IRONWOMEN

The following wrestlers clocked the most in-ring time during this year's Royal Rumble matches.

WOMEN'S RUMBLE

1. Bianca Belair* at 56:50
2. Naomi at 47:39
3. Shayna Baszler at 41:46
4. Rhea Ripley at 39:06
5. Charlotte Flair at 39:06

*Beat Natalya's previous record of 56:01

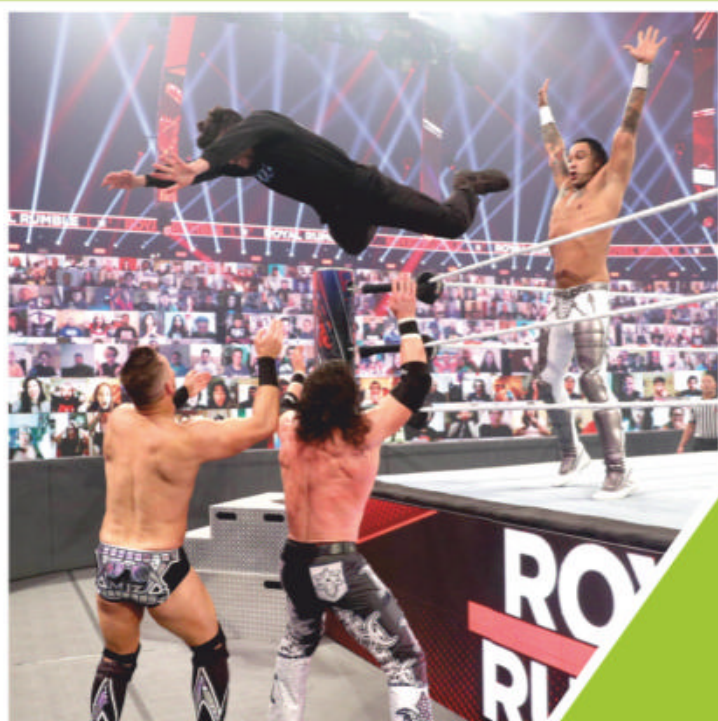
**Orton spent much of the match backstage being attended to by medical staff

MEN'S RUMBLE

1. Edge and Randy Orton** at 1:00:32
2. Riddle at 31:17
3. Big E at 29:45
4. Daniel Bryan at 28:50
5. Shinsuke Nakamura at 22:01



Global musical sensation **Bad Bunny** performs his recent single, “Booker T,” with the song’s namesake by his side (left). Later, the popular rapper would make an appearance during the Men’s Rumble, taking out Miz & John Morrison with a flying crossbody (right).



Lesnar for the WWE championship at WrestleMania. McIntyre won and has remained a dominant champion—except for a few weeks when Randy Orton reigned—ever since.

Edge and Orton were announced prior to the 2021 Rumble for the #1 and #2 spots. Following the history between them, the former tag partners-turned-bitter enemies fought ringside before the match officially started. The main event Rumble contained many surprises and highlights, including the return of Carlito after 10 years away, a hilarious bit with Sami Zayn’s documentary crew, the anticipated return of new father Seth Rollins, a guest wrestling appearance from popular recording artist Bad Bunny, and the long-awaited reunion of Edge & Christian.

Early in the match, Randy Orton was removed due to an “injury,” and later seen in a picture-in-picture moment being looked at by medical professionals. At the very end of the Rumble, with a seemingly victorious Edge standing mid-ring unaware, Orton reappeared and hit an RKO. “The Viper” picked up his rival to throw him over the ropes, but Edge regained his bearings and eliminated him—putting an end to Orton’s schemes and guaranteeing his title opportunity at WrestleMania 37. ■



Notable surprises in the Men’s Rumble included the returning Carlito (left, hitting Shinsuke Nakamura with the Backstabber) and The Hurricane (above), who seemingly never learns his lesson when it comes to chokeslamming two opponents at once. (He was promptly eliminated by Bobby Lashley and Big E.)

SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION:
NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING
DATE: 01.04.21-01.05.21
LOCATION: TOKYO, JAPAN



TEXT BY WALTER YEATES
PHOTOS ©2021 NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, LTD.



This year's Wrestle Kingdom was the culmination of a years-long journey for Kota Ibushi, who used his signature Kamigoye knee strike to win the IWGP "Double Championship" from Tetsuya Naito on night one (top right) and successfully defend the prestigious title against Jay White (bottom right) on night two.



SUPERCARDS 2021

WRESTLE KINGDOM 15



The New Japan Ranbo served as a showcase for competitors who didn't otherwise have a place on the Wrestle Kingdom card, including Yuji Nagata (above, chopping Minoru Suzuki) and DOUKI (below, getting himself disqualified).

NJPW President Takami Ohbari back in December.

"Wrestle Kingdom is our flagship event and represents our brand very strongly. So, while yes, there are risks involved, if we couldn't do this year what we were able to do last year, that weakens our image," Ohbari told *PWI*. "Not only that, it lessens our ability to lift people up and to be a symbol of strength. So, we decided to take on that challenge."

NIGHT ONE

The first night of NJPW's annual Tokyo Dome event opened with the New Japan



NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING began the 2021 calendar year with the two-night Wrestle Kingdom 15 feature event, a yearly tradition that has become an international spectacle in professional wrestling. The decision for Wrestle Kingdom to return with a two-night format despite the COVID-19 pandemic came up during the *PWI* exclusive interview—featured in our digital-only issue, *Inside NJPW*, available through Zinio—with

Ranbo, a special match combining over-the-top-rope, pinfall, and submission eliminations with a caveat—the final four participants would face one another during Wrestle Kingdom 15, night two, to decide who would begin the year as KOPW (presumably King of Pro Wrestling) titleholder in 2021.

After a match that lasted nearly 35 minutes, the final four included Bullet Club members "Crown Jewel" Chase Owens and "Rogue General" Bad Luck Fale. Joining them were Los Ingobernables

SUPERCARDS 2021

KENTA gloats with the IWGP U.S. title briefcase, which he'd cash in against Jon Moxley on February 26.



faced Super J-Cup 2020 winner and Bullet Club member El Phantasma in the next match, with the winner going on to night two to challenge IWGP junior heavyweight champion, “Bone Soldier” Taiji Ishimori, in his V1 defense of the title.

Takahashi was able to defeat ELP in a highly competitive match at the 17 minute and 46 second mark to move on to night two.

The next match saw World Tag League 2020

de Japon member BUSHI and CHAOS member (and 2020 KOPW titleholder) Toru Yano.

Of note, Owens entered the Ranbo at the beginning and was able to last the full 34 minutes and 40 seconds.

Best of the Super Juniors 27 winner and Los Ingobernables de Japon member Hiromu Takahashi

With their victory over Dangerous Tekkers, the Guerrillas of Destiny began their record-setting seventh reign as IWGP heavyweight tag champs.



El Desperado locks Ryusuke Taguchi in a modified Stretch Muffler in the match where he and Yoshinobu Kanemaru easily retained the IWGP junior tag belts over Taguchi and Master Wato.

winners Guerrillas of Destiny of the Bullet Club defeat the Suzuki-Gun team of Dangerous Tekkers (Taichi & Zack Sabre Jr.) in their V3 defense of the IWGP heavyweight tag team championship in 19 minutes and 18 seconds.

The championship victory began Tama Tonga and Tanga Loa's record-setting seventh reign as IWGP heavyweight tag team champions, surpassing TenKoji.

Speaking of TenKoji, one-half of the prolific tag team, Satoshi Kojima was unable to defeat Bullet Club member KENTA for the briefcase containing a con-

SUPERCARDS 2021

TOP 5 MOMENTS COMING OUT OF WRESTLE KINGDOM

1. Wrestle Kingdom 15, night one was **the first million-dollar gate** in professional wrestling since the COVID-19 pandemic led to “empty arena” shows globally.
2. **Kota Ibushi winning the IWGP heavyweight championship** topped off a multi-year story where he attempted to reach the most prestigious crown in New Japan Pro-Wrestling.
3. **Kazuchika Okada defeating Will Ospreay** put Okada back on the path to challenge for the IWGP heavyweight championship in 2021.
4. **Hiroshi Tanahashi defeating Great-O-Khan** showed he will remain a key member of the roster for at least another year.
5. Despite their loss, **Dangerous Tekkers proved they are a legitimate tag team** on the global stage.

Empire member Great-O-Khan in 17 minutes and 13 seconds, gaining revenge for the vicious attack by the Empire faction on his knee during World Tag League. Empire leader, “The Commonwealth Kingpin” Will Ospreay also tasted defeat as CHAOS member Kazuchika Okada bested him in 35 minutes and 41 seconds during the penultimate match of the evening.

“Golden Star” Kota Ibushi was able to capture the IWGP heavyweight and IWGP Intercontinental “Double Championship” in the marquee match, defeating Tetsuya Naito during his V2 defense of the dual crown in 31 minutes and 18 seconds.

NIGHT TWO

Wrestle Kingdom 15, night two, began with two exhibition matches from World Wonder Ring Stardom, which shares the same parent company (Bushiroad) as New Japan Pro-Wrestling.

The first match saw Queen’s Quest members Saya Kamitani, Utami Hayashishita, and AZM defeat Donna del Mondo members Maika, Himeka, and Natsupoi in 9 minutes and 48 seconds. The second exhibition match saw Donna del Mondo members Giulia and Syuri defeat STARS members Mayu Iwatani and Tam Nakano in 12 minutes and 49 seconds.



Nobody throws a dropkick quite like Kazuchika Okada, seen here against Will Ospreay on night one of Wrestle Kingdom.



Night two opened with a pre-show six-woman tag match, featuring six wrestlers from Stardom. Here, Natsupoi attempts a pinfall on Saya Kamitani, who would ultimately pin Natsupoi following a Phoenix Splash.

tract for an IWGP United States heavyweight championship match against reigning champion Jon Moxley. The match lasted 14 minutes and 12 seconds.

Next, Hiroshi Tanahashi was able to defeat

WRESTLE KINGDOM 15

SUPERCARDS 2021



The defending 2020 KOPW champ, Toru Yano, makes his way to the ring, where he'd win the prize for the second straight year.

Gun team of Yoshinobu Kanemaru and El Desperado have a successful V2 defense of the IWGP junior heavyweight tag team title by defeating Ryusuke Taguchi and Master Wato in 13 minutes and 20 seconds.

In a hard-hitting, competitive bout, Los Ingobernables de Japon standout Shingo Takagi was

The main card opened with Toru Yano beating Bushi, Chase Owens, and Bad Luck Fale in 7 minutes and 34 seconds—following dissension between Owens and Fale—to become the KOPW 2021 Provisional titleholder. As mentioned earlier, Yano ended 2020 as the KOPW champion and will look to do the same this year.

The second match saw the Suzuki-

Shingo Takagi clobbers Jeff Cobb in a thrilling singles match that was cited by many viewers as one of the finest at this year's Wrestle Kingdom.



SANADA attempts to claim the submission victory over his longtime tag team partner, EVIL.



SUPERCARDS 2021

WRESTLE KINGDOM 15



Junior heavyweight matches are often fast-paced and full of acrobatics. But Taiji Ishimori and Hiromu Takahashi wrestled a style that was slower and more deliberate—not unlike many of NJPW’s main event heavyweight bouts.

junior heavyweight champion. The bout was historic due to it being the highest placement of an IWGP junior heavyweight championship match inside the Tokyo Dome.

The marquee contest saw Kota Ibushi have a successful V1 defense of the IWGP heavyweight and IWGP Intercontinental “Double Championship” against Bullet Club

able to manage a successful V1 defense of the NEVER openweight championship against Empire member Jeff Cobb in 21 minutes and 11 seconds. Cobb's tough loss meant Empire went 0-3 at Wrestle Kingdom 15.

In a grudge match between former two-time World Tag League winners (who were also two-time heavyweight tag team champions), Los Ingobernables de Japon staple SANADA defeated Bullet Club defector EVIL in 23 minutes and 40 seconds. The victory for SANADA positioned him as a contender for the “Double Championship.”

The semi-main event saw Hiromu Takahashi beat Taiji Ishimori in 25 minutes and 31 seconds to begin his fourth reign as IWGP

member “Switchblade” Jay White in 48 minutes and 5 seconds. The match made history by being the longest main event ever to take place at Wrestle Kingdom.



Jay White was a tough first challenger for newly crowned “Double Champion” Kota Ibushi. But the “Golden Star” was up to the challenge and, ultimately, walked away with his championship reign intact.



SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION: ALL ELITE WRESTLING

DATE: 01.06.21 & 01.13.21

LOCATION: JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

TEXT BY SCOTT FISHMAN

PHOTOS BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



Trademarks be damned: Kenny Omega, the Young Bucks, and Impact Wrestling's Good Brothers give a nod to NJPW's Bullet Club and its signature "Too Sweet" gesture.

ALL ELITE WRESTLING kicked off 2021 with New Year's Smash. The two-week special—which unfolded on *Dynamite* in January—was pushed back a week due to the December 30 episode dedicated to honoring Jon Huber (Brodie Lee, Luke Harper), after his tragic passing.

NIGHT ONE

The first night of action kicked off with a hot opener highlighting AEW's strong tag team division. The Young Bucks and SoCal Uncensored (Christopher Daniels & Frankie Kazarian) defeated The Acclaimed and The Hybrid 2. Those who've read the book, *Young Bucks: Killing the Business from Backyards to the Big Leagues*, know what a thrill it must have been for Matt and Nick Jackson to team with SCU. The match ended in spectacular fashion when Matt and

Daniels hit a combination of their respective finishers.

Shortly after, Kazarian said the next time SCU loses, they'll split up (a stipulation similar to Ric Flair's retirement run heading into WrestleMania 24). This underscores the importance of SCU's mission to become tag team champions.

Wardlow opened many eyes with a decisive win over fellow Inner Circle member Jake Hager. The emerging powerhouse often blends into the background as the muscle behind MJF, but this was an



AEW World Women's champ Hikaru Shida celebrates her sixth successful defense—a win over the rookie Abadon.

SUPERCARDS 2021

NEW YEAR'S SMASH



▶ **Snoop Dogg is no Eddie Guerrero—maybe not even Eddie Ellner—but his top-rope splash on Serpentico made headlines all the same.**

opportunity to show what he can really do. Wardlow is someone who will only get better. Hager did the honors after Wardlow hit his F-10 finishing maneuver.

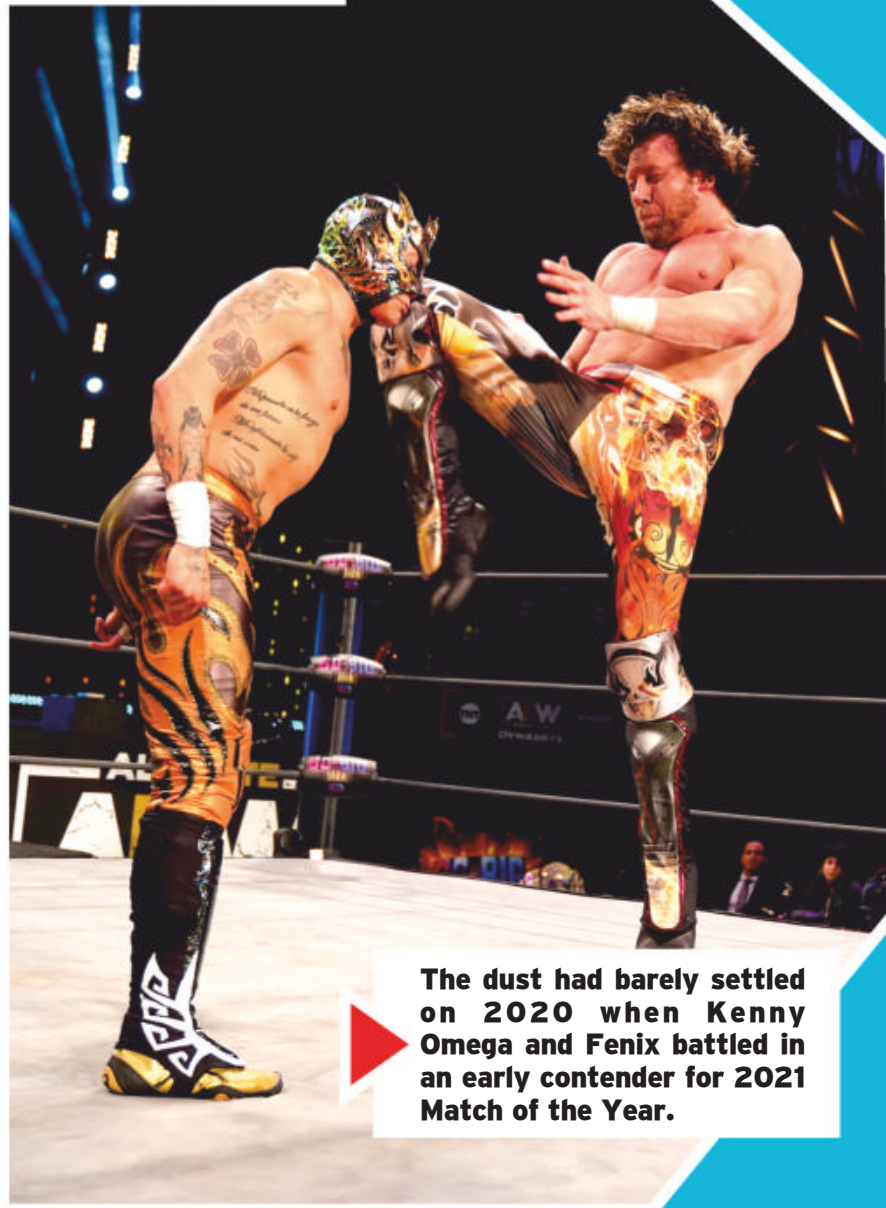
Cody Rhodes defeated Matt Sydal with Cross Rhodes in a solid outing. The “American Nightmare” has ensured all his matches stand out, no matter who his opponent is. And he shined against a very game Sydal. Arn Anderson got the night off as Rhodes was seconded to the ring by WWE Hall-of-Famer Snoop Dogg. The rapper and all-around entertainer appeared as part of the promotional push for the *Go-Big Show*. Snoop, who judges on the extreme talent competition on TBS alongside Rhodes, didn’t just watch from the sidelines. The noted life-long fan got involved, helping fend off an attack from Luther and Serpentico. He even went to the top rope and hit a splash while Rhodes counted three. A fun moment, but that didn’t stop his real-life cousin

Sasha Banks from weighing in on his technique and suggesting there was work to be done.

Things got physical between AEW Women’s champion Hikaru Shida and challenger Abadon. The Japanese star’s lengthy reign continued with a victory via her Tamashii knee. At one point, Shida apparently got bitten by Abadon under the ring. Despite Shida being a solid champ, the division remains a work in progress.

The main event of night one did not disappoint, as AEW champion Kenny Omega fended off Rey Fenix. Expectations were high for this one, given the two involved, and these two delivered an early “Match Of The Year” candidate. Despite falling to the One-Winged Angel, Fenix reminded us he can deliver in big match situations.

Chaos followed when Eddie Kingston and his Family attacked PAC and Pentagon Jr. Jon Moxley looked to even the odds with a barbed wire bat



▶ **The dust had barely settled on 2020 when Kenny Omega and Fenix battled in an early contender for 2021 Match of the Year.**

SUPERCARDS 2021

NEW YEAR'S SMASH

NIGHT TWO

Night two saw PAC defeat Eddie Kingston with the always-impressive Black Arrow. It was clear after so many months outside the ring Pac wasn't sitting at home munching on pizza and donuts, as he lived up to his reputation as a top-tier worker. Kingston also remains a consistently solid talent whose style is a welcome, old-school throwback.

Miro imposed his power and athletic ability on Chuck Taylor. With Trent sidelined by injury, "Chuckie T" looked a little out of sorts. Even though Orange Cassidy was there for support, Miro was too much for him. With the loss, Taylor was forced to serve as Miro's butler until Kip Sabian and



Though ostensibly heels, Rebel and Britt Baker have an undeniable, affable chemistry that makes their "Waiting Room" segments must-see TV (above). Of course, it doesn't hurt to have can't-miss guests like Jade Cargill and Cody Rhodes (below).



attack on Omega. Impact tag champions, the Good Brothers, came to Omega's rescue. The trio took out anyone else who came to help. Enter the Young Bucks, who joined in on the chaos by superkicking Brian Pillman Jr. and Griff Garrison. They collectively raised the "Too Sweet" sign in a Bullet Club mini-reunion before signing off. The scene came off very much like an old *Monday Nitro*, but it worked.



PAC clobbers Eddie Kingston with a knee strike in the opening match of New Year's Smash, night two.

TOP 5 NEW YEAR'S SMASHINGLY DYNAMITE MOMENTS:

The brothers in paint, Darby Allin and Sting, are an intriguing cross-generational alliance.

A Bullet Club reunion, if only for an evening, was too sweet.

Snoop Dogg went big with his splash off the top rope. We'll take it, but he should've been on commentary, too.

Cody Rhodes was a welcome guest on the *Dynamite* debut of "The Waiting Room." Britt Baker and Rebel splurged for the pyro, and by pyro we mean sparklers. Seriously, Baker needs her own late night talk show. Get to work on that, TBS or TNT.

The Inner Circle giving their New Year's resolutions makes the list, mainly because Sammy Guevara mocked Chris Jericho for his tag team promiscuity.

FTR (with Tully Blanchard) were victorious in a competitive tag bout against Jurassic Express (Jungle Boy & Marko Stunt). Whatever Tony Khan spent on securing the rights to "Tarzan Boy" as Jungle Boy's entrance music, it was worth every penny. The tag division is quite healthy with multiple viable contenders.

Serena Deeb successfully defended the NWA Women's championship against Tay Conti, who was backed by the Dark Order's Anna Jay. When you're building a women's division from the ground up, you want a capable performer like Deeb on your roster. Conti and other young members of the roster are all the better working with her.

In a true David vs. Goliath pairing, Darby Allin overcame Brian Cage in the main event TNT championship battle. Cage took full advantage of his more than hundred-pound weight advantage, throwing the champ around like a sack of potatoes. Allin truly puts his body on the line in every match—very similar to Jeff Hardy in style and the connection he has with the audience. Sting once again came out to help even the odds for Allin against other members of Taz's team. Sting does so much by *not* doing too much. It has been an effective approach early in his AEW run. ■

Penelope Ford's wedding at Beach Break in February.

Kenny Omega pulled the rug from under any plans for a Bullet Club reunion in AEW—at least the one involving the Young Bucks—when he falsely led them to believe they would be teaming together against Danny LimeLight and the Varsity Blondes (Pillman Jr. and Garrison).

Instead, he decided to pull in his Good Brothers from Impact Wrestling for the match. Even in defeat, the young stars got some offense in against the Elite veterans. Omega's business associate Don Callis is certainly living his best life with a featured spot on AEW and Impact TV!



► Miro earns the submission win over Chuck Taylor in a singles bout, ensuring Taylor would serve as his personal butler in the weeks ahead.

SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION: LUCHA LIBRE AAA**DATE: 12.12.20****LOCATION: MEXICO CITY, MEXICO**

TEXT BY JAKE JOYCE

PHOTOS BY LUCHA LIBRE AAA

FOR NEARLY 30 years, AAA's Triplemania has been of great interest to wrestling fans worldwide. For lucha purists, the supercard marks a time for celebration. To casual viewers, the ones who perch on the edge of the fandom, the event sometimes plays out more like a dark comedy than a stoic epic. Certain fans tune in specifically expecting chaos ... and they may be justified in doing so. After all, Triplemania 23 saw a match between Psycho Circus and The Villanos receive a very rare -5 star rating from the *Wrestling Observer* newsletter—one of only five matches to ever receive that grade.

But, in true 2020 fashion, Triplemania 28 defied expectations and presented the wrestling world with a robust, cohesive, and exciting product.

First airing in 1993, Triplemania has served as AAA's biggest event for almost three decades. Typically taking place in

August, the presentation of the event had to undergo a makeover due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ringside was free of any fans, and the event was moved from its traditional late-summer date to one in mid-December. Although the pandemic was the most pressing matter, it wasn't the only thing that altered Triplemania's model.

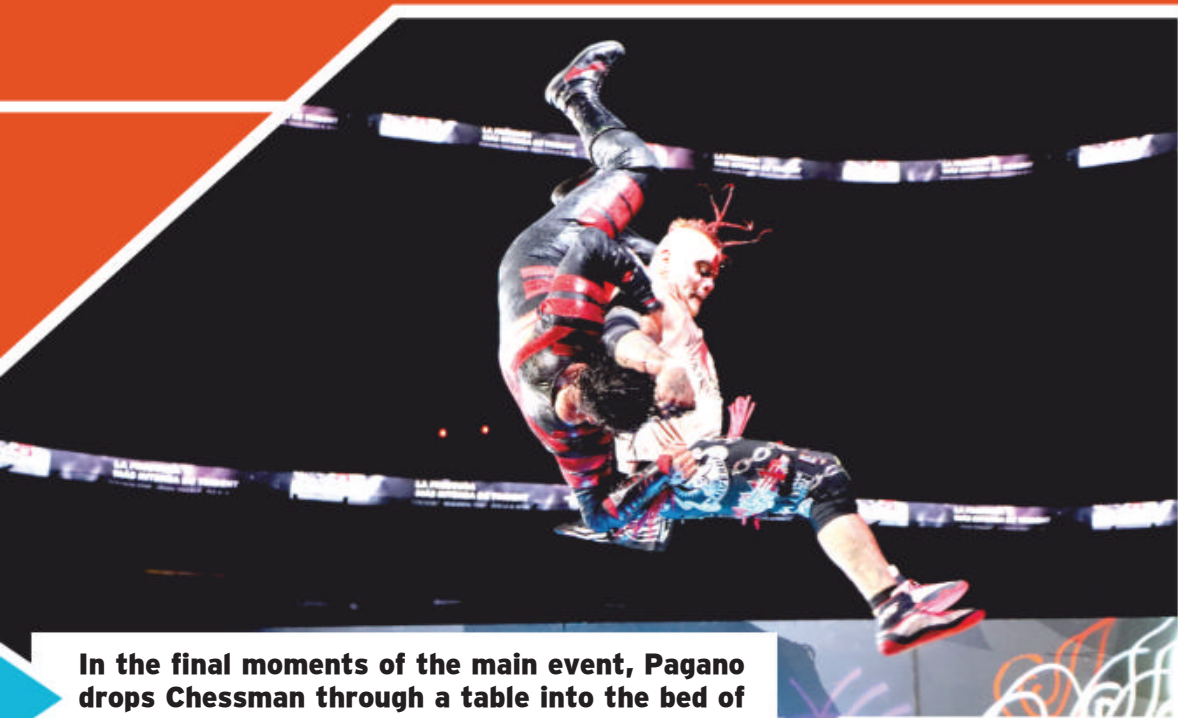
Merely ten days removed from his contentious AEW World title win, Kenny Omega was to defend his AAA Mega championship against an opponent he knew quite well: Laredo Kid. With the announcement of Omega on the card, AAA officials obviously understood that there would be new eyes on their product, and this fresh audience was likely to be an English-speaking one with little to no knowledge of lucha libre, let alone AAA itself.

To cater to this new demographic, commentator Hugo Savinovich took on a bilingual role, calling most of the event in Spanish while simul-



The Mega title bout between challenger Laredo Kid and champion Kenny Omega was a big draw for international wrestling fans ... and it did not disappoint.

SUPERCARDS 2021



In the final moments of the main event, Pagano drops Chessman through a table into the bed of a pickup truck, securing the pinfall.

Poder del Norte and the team of Dinastia, Maximo, and Mr. Iguana—pitting the latter pairing's high-flying style against Poder del Norte's brawling tactics. The battle devolved into a melee of weaponry, with Poder del Norte using whatever they could find at ringside, while Dinastia, Maximo, and Mr. Iguana made amusing use of the latter's signature stuffed lizard.

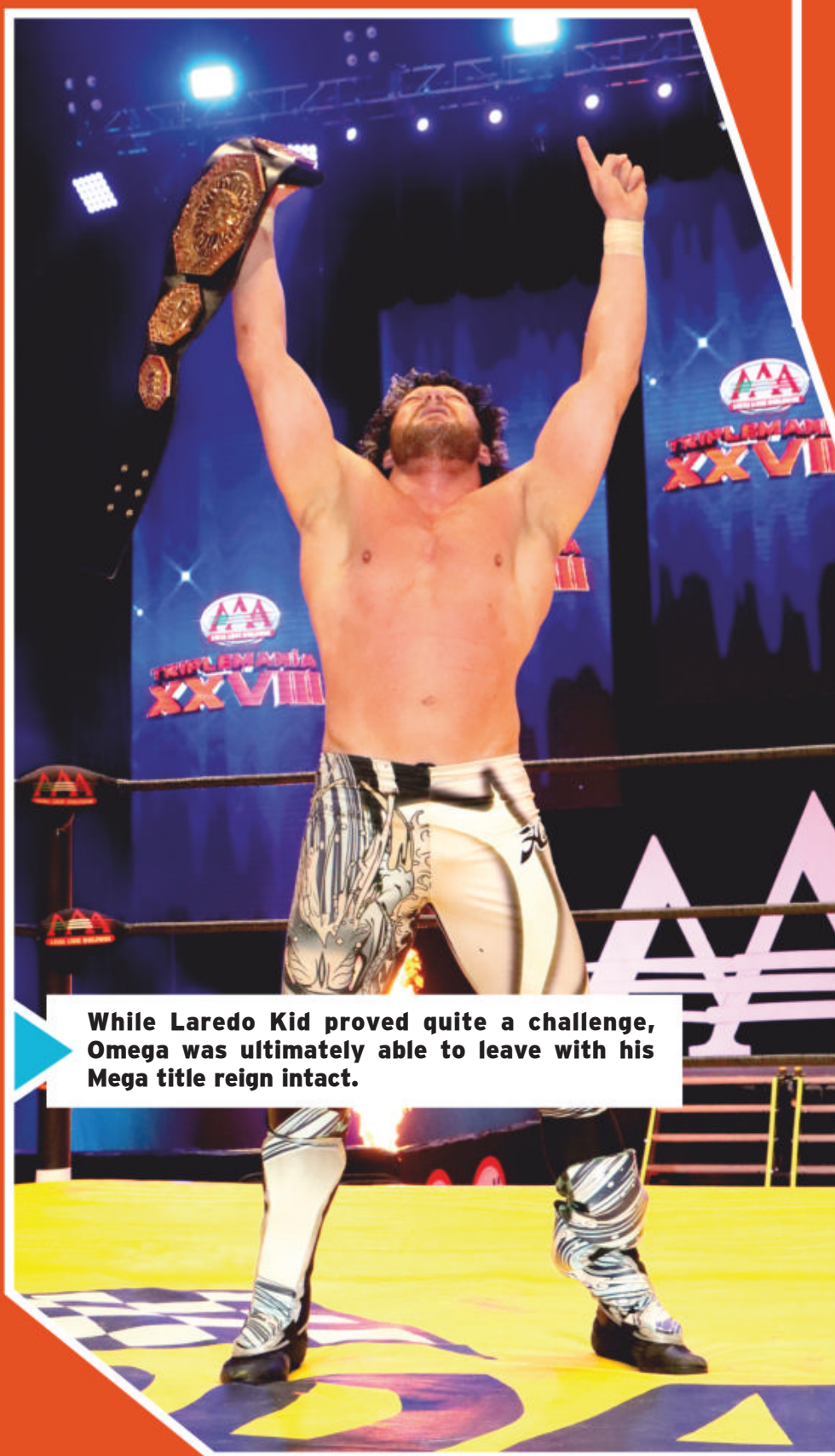
taneously cluing English-speaking viewers in on crucial moments and explaining the importance of specific matches or stipulations. While Triplemania usually features an English commentary team, Savinovich's energy arguably created a much more authentic and compelling product for newbies, while still keeping them abreast of the story.

Though the Mega championship match was expected to attract a large number of international viewers, the actual main event would be a Hair vs. Hair match—a huge, emotional ordeal in lucha libre. Lucha veteran Chessman would take on traveling deathmatch wrestler Pagano in a jaw-dropping hardcore bout, closing the show in a heap of carnage.

But that was later. Triplemania kicked off with a trios match between seasoned partners Nuevo

Lady Shani celebrates with the coveted Triplemania Cup after besting eight other competitors.





While Laredo Kid proved quite a challenge, Omega was ultimately able to leave with his Mega title reign intact.

Following a post-match brawl, AAA paid tribute to Jesus Alfonso Huerta Escoboza, who passed last January. Escoboza had, for more than 20 years, wrestled as La Parka after the originator of the character lost the rights to the name (and became LA Park). Escoboza tragically died following complications from a dive gone wrong at a KAOZ Lucha Libre event in October 2019.

After a plaque dedication and tribute video for the late La Parka finished, the AAA World tag team championship was successfully defended by the Lucha Bros. in a three-way tag

team match against Jinetes Del Aire and Los Mercenarios. In a match made for lucha purists, Pentagon Jr. picked up the winning fall for his team. It was three of the finest teams in Mexico doing what they do best.

After another post-match dust-up, the event's annual Triplemania Cup battle royal boldly broke with tradition. While usually contested among AAA's male wrestlers, this year's Triplemania Cup was to feature the promotion's impressive women's roster and *exoticos*. Eventually won by the talented Lady Shani, the battle royal played out like a 1990s King's Road match in fast-forward—each woman landing moves like rolling elbows and release German suplexes. It was an entertaining contest that, yes, also featured a post-match brawl.

Although AAA endeavored to reach a much more diverse viewership, the company made sure to include appeals to the younger audience. Cue Psycho Circus. If Hiroshi Tanahashi is the ace of New Japan, then Psycho Clown is his AAA counterpart. A fan favorite of well over a decade, Psycho Clown teamed with Murder Clown and Monster Clown for the first time since March, defeating the trio of Blue Demon Jr., LA Park, and El Hijo de LA Park. Following yet *another* post-match brawl, the fans were treated to a rare spectacle—a collaborative effort between AAA and Marvel to bring their superheroes to life in a wrestling ring. In the final match of the undercard, Terror Purpura & Venenoide defeated Aracno & Leyenda Americana. The men under the hoods were later said by Dave Meltzer to be Brian Cage, Black

RESULTS

- ▶ **Poder del Norte defeated Dinastia, Maximo, and Mr. Iguana in 16:00.**
- ▶ **Lucha Bros. defeated Jinetes del Aire and Los Mercenarios to retain the AAA World tag team championship in 14:18.**
- ▶ **Lady Shani won the Copa Triplemania Femenil by last eliminating Lady Maravilla in 23:10.**
- ▶ **Psycho Circus defeated Blue Demon Jr. and La Familia Real in 11:40.**
- ▶ **Terror Purpura & Venenoide defeated Aracno & Leyenda Americana in 12:06.**
- ▶ **Kenny Omega defeated Laredo Kid to retain the AAA Mega championship in 23:36.**
- ▶ **Pagano defeated Chessman in a Hair vs. Hair match in 23:50.**

that would kill any normal human, Pagano pinned Chessman after nearly 24 minutes. Per the stipulation, Chessman was now obliged to lose his hair. Hair vs. Hair matches are rare in mainstream American wrestling promotions, and Hugo Savinovich did a fantastic job explaining the significance of the bout to the English-speaking audience.

In an unprecedented year that saw the world of professional wrestling turned upside down—forcing many to reinvent their presentation and product—it was refreshing to see AAA come through with another successful and enjoyable Triplemania. Less is more, and AAA heavily benefited from the streamlining of its program. Hopefully, the promotion will be

able to continue this trend in a stadium full of people in 2021. ■

Taurus, Lio Rush, and Daga, respectively.

A video was shown recapping the history between Kenny Omega and Laredo Kid. As the bout began, it was clear Omega planned to dictate the pace of the entire match, bringing it to a plodding crawl. Well, a plodding crawl compared to the fights that came prior! Slowing Laredo Kid's offense and grounding him whenever possible proved beneficial for Omega. "The Cleaner" was claimed the victor after a One-Winged Angel from the middle turnbuckle, retaining the AAA Mega championship.

What followed was one of the most violent, visceral bouts that has ever appeared on any major North American wrestling show. Having survived a handful of table-spots and dives



A victorious Pagano shows off his prize—a clutch of the long, dark locks of his rival Chessman.

SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION: IMPACT WRESTLING

DATE: 01.16.21

LOCATION: NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH

PHOTOS BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



Kenny Omega, the Good Brothers, and Don Callis celebrate a main-event win over three of Impact's top competitors.



Taya Valkyrie battled valiantly against Knockouts champ Deonna Purrazzo but would ultimately submit to the Venus de Milo. This would turn out to be Valkyrie's final Impact match.



IMPACT WRESTLING'S FIRST PPV of 2021 was held on Saturday, January 16, 2021, at Skyway Studios in Nashville, Tennessee. Although there were no fans in attendance due to Impact's COVID-19 safety protocols, there was still a genuine buzz of excitement surrounding the show. Much of that excitement was because the event promised the in-ring debut of AEW World champion Kenny Omega in Impact Wrestling.

Impact's newest broadcast team, Matt Striker and D'Lo Brown, welcomed everyone to the pay-per-view, which kicked off with a partial reunion of the Decay faction as Rosemary and Crazy Steve joined forces to take on Tenille Dashwood and Kaleb with a K. The intergender tag team match saw brawling, biting, and even a gratuitous selfie by Dashwood and Kaleb. In the end, both of these ultra-vain individuals found themselves the recipients of facefuls of green mist, which allowed Decay to pick up the win.

SUPERCARDS 2021



Expecting a shot at the X division title, Ace Austin was instead greeted with a surprise opponent: the debuting Matt Cardona (FKA Zack Ryder).

tried to keep a fast pace going, they were often slowed by the power of their opponents. A particularly powerful moment saw Havok nail a fall-away slam on Hogan and Steelz at the same time. Fire 'n' Flava were able to regroup, however, and, thanks to some stellar teamwork, Hogan was able to hit Nevaeh with a fisherman's buster for the win ... and the resurrected Knockouts tag straps.

Next up, Ace Austin stormed to ringside and demanded to be inserted into the upcoming X division title match. At first, it appeared that Impact Executive Vice President Scott D'Amore would acquiesce to this demand. As it turned out, D'Amore had an ace up his own sleeve for Mr. Austin, in the form of the debuting Matt Cardona. A hastily

Eric Young's WWE stint only seems to have worsened his mental state and, in turn, made him more violent. It's rather fitting, then, that he has named his association with Joe Doering and Cody Deaner "Violent by Design." The brooding faction defeated the trio of Tommy Dreamer, Rhino, and Cousin Jake in a wild six-man tag match that saw the combatants brawl all over the building and use a plethora of plunder, including chairs and thumbtacks.

The finals of the tournament to crown new Knockouts tag team champions saw the "Fire 'n' Flava" duo of Kiera Hogan & Tasha Steelz go up against Havok & Nevaeh. While Hogan and Steelz



Kiera Hogan and Tasha Steelz—collectively known as Fire 'n' Flava—pose with their newly won Knockouts tag team title belts.



TJP bridges over Rohit Raju and scores the pinfall, retaining his X division belt in a three-way match that also featured Chris Bey.

arranged match between the two ensued, but ended in mere minutes when Austin's associate, Madman Fulton, attacked Cardona and caused the DQ.

Even without Ace Austin's involvement, the triple-threat match for the X division championship went a long way in stealing the show—thanks to the athletic feats of Chris Bey, Rohit Raju, and champion TJP. In a contest

FEARLESS TO KICK

SUPERCARDS 2021



▶ The latest of Su Yung's personas, the detestable "Susan," glares at photographer Basil Mahmud. She'd soon be ejected from ringside.



▶ With the aid of a barbed wire-clad chair, Eddie Edwards clobbers Sami Callihan with the Boston Knee Party (above). Post-match, Knockouts division mainstay Alisha Edwards checks on her husband (right).



full of explosive maneuvers and daredevil action, it was TJP who retained his title with a simple roll-up on Raju. The finish showed that, sometimes, it's the fundamentals that bring the most success.

The longest reigning Knockouts champion of all-time, Taya Valkyrie, came up short in her attempt to dethrone defending champ Deonna Purrazzo in a match that saw "The Virtuosa" neutralize Valkyrie's superior size and strength by targeting her limbs and setting her up for the decisive submission victory. The 26-year-old Purrazzo has defeated an impressive list of Knockouts since arriving in Impact. But adding a competitor like Taya Valkyrie to the list—and so conclusively—must have been special for her.

Special is also a word that could be used to describe ... whatever it was that came next, as Ethan Page went one-on-one with Ethan Page. Well, one of them wasn't Ethan Page *exactly*, but instead was "All Ego's" alter ego, The Karate Man. There isn't enough space here to adequately describe the cinematic, Mortal Kombat-influenced encounter that followed. But, suffice to say, it may be the last we see of Ethan Page in an Impact ring.

Eddie Edwards and Sami Callihan added a gory new entry to their storied rivalry as the two clashed in a Barbed Wire Massacre match that saw them hack and slash each other with reckless abandon. Nothing was off limits in this match—not even a Nintendo 64 controller wrapped in barbed wire. In the end, it was a wrestling move—albeit, onto a barbed wire-covered board—that brought Edwards the victory, as he

THE TOP 5 MOST IMPACTFUL MOMENTS OF HARD TO KILL

1. The AEW World champion pins the Impact Wrestling World champion.

Kenny Omega did not disappoint in his maiden Impact outing.

2. Matt Cardona debuts in Impact Wrestling.

Can the former Zack Ryder see a career resurgence in a new promotion?

3. Gail Kim and Madison Rayne present the Knockout tag titles to Fire 'n' Flava.

A passing of the torch from two Knockout greats.

4. Eddie Edwards defeats Sami Callihan with Emerald Flowsion.

Defeating your bitterest rival with your hero's finisher has to feel sweet.

5. The Karate Man rips out Ethan Page's heart.

Yes, literally ripped it out of his chest.



THE OMEGA MAN

Kenny Omega, AEW World champion, stepped into an Impact Wrestling ring (wearing a NJPW Bullet Club t-shirt) and proceeded to blow up every preconceived idea of what a wrestler and, indeed, wrestling promotions, can be in 2021. Omega's participation at Hard to Kill showed what can happen when promoters work together for the good of each other, the wrestlers, and, most importantly, the good of the fans. Someday, we may look back and point to Kenny Omega as being someone who brought about real change in a business that has always been too restrictive—or too afraid—to share talent.

downed Callihan with Mitsuharu Misawa's trademark Emerald Flowsion slam.

Anyone who thought that Kenny Omega came to Impact Wrestling simply to hang out with his friends surely changed their mindset during the course of the six-man tag main event. Indeed, Omega put forth every bit of effort and passion he might muster in an AEW ring—and, in doing so, seemed to make everyone else in the match raise their game a little bit more. Going into the contest, it was disputed whether the makeshift team of Impact World champ Rich Swann, Chris Sabin, and Moose (subbing for Alex Shelley) could coexist, as they faced long-time friends Omega, Doc Gallows, and Karl Anderson. But coexist they did ... and to an impressive degree.

Everyone involved unleashed an arsenal of big moves, but perhaps no one impressed more than Moose, who wrestled the match like he was a man half his size. The finishing sequence saw Omega nail Moose and Swann with V-Trigger knee strikes before hitting the One-Winged Angel on Swann for the pin.

Who could have guessed we'd see AEW World champion Kenny Omega take on Impact World champion Rich Swann in 2021? PWI's Jason McVeigh hopes interpromotional bouts are more than just a passing fad.



SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION: MAJOR LEAGUE WRESTLING

DATE: 01.06.21

LOCATION: ORLANDO, FLORIDA



TEXT BY KEVIN McELVANEY

PHOTOS BY HARRY AARON/MLW

Lio Rush gazes lovingly upon the MLW World middleweight title, which he won in his very first match with the company.

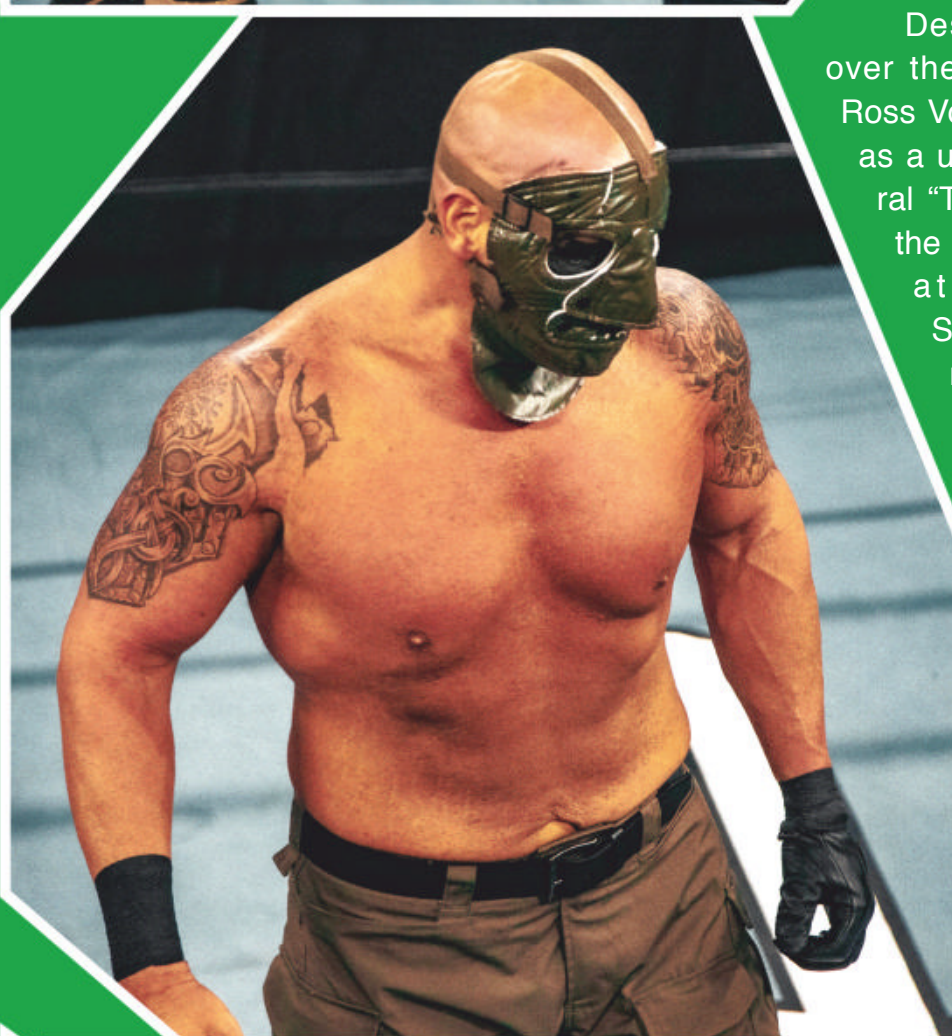


ORIGINALLY CONCEIVED AS the company's second ever pay-per-view event, Major League Wrestling's Kings of Colosseum was instead offered for free in the promotion's usual *Fusion* timeslot. The event, which was the sequel to the 2019 supercard of the same name, was scheduled to feature four matches—including three championship bouts.

THE VON ERICHS VS. THE DIRTY BLONDES

Despite a relative lack of activity over the last 12 months, Marshall and Ross Von Erich were impressive enough as a unit to rank #39 on *PW*'s inaugural "Tag Team 50" list. After defeating the duo of MJF and Richard Holliday at 2019's Saturday Night SuperFight, the Von Erichs retained the MLW World tag title throughout early 2020 and reemerged to defend it when the company returned from its COVID-19 shutdown.

Their opponents at Kings of Colosseum were The Dirty Blondes: Leo Brien & Mike Patrick. Newcomers to MLW, Brien and Patrick are a rough-and-ready, old-school pairing, the likes of which earlier generations of Von Erichs have been forced to contend with. They were accompanied by their manager, Aria Blake, who became involved in the match on more than one occasion.



Ever since his first appearance, the masked Mads Krugger has been wreaking havoc upon Major League Wrestling.

Kruger grabs MLW openweight champ Alexander Hammerstone by the throat with a boldness most opponents of Hammerstone's could never dream of.



ing MLW World champ Jacob Fatu and new Contra Unit member Daivari to pummel the younger team.

MYRON REED VS. LIO RUSH

Even if the aforementioned Contra Unit attack had never occurred, Kings of Colosseum would've been a rough night for Injustice. For his fifth title defense, MLW middleweight champion Myron Reed was accompanied by partner Jordan Oliver as he faced off against the debuting Lio Rush. MLW commentators Rich Bocchini and Saint Laurent pointed out the differences in attitude between these two men. For

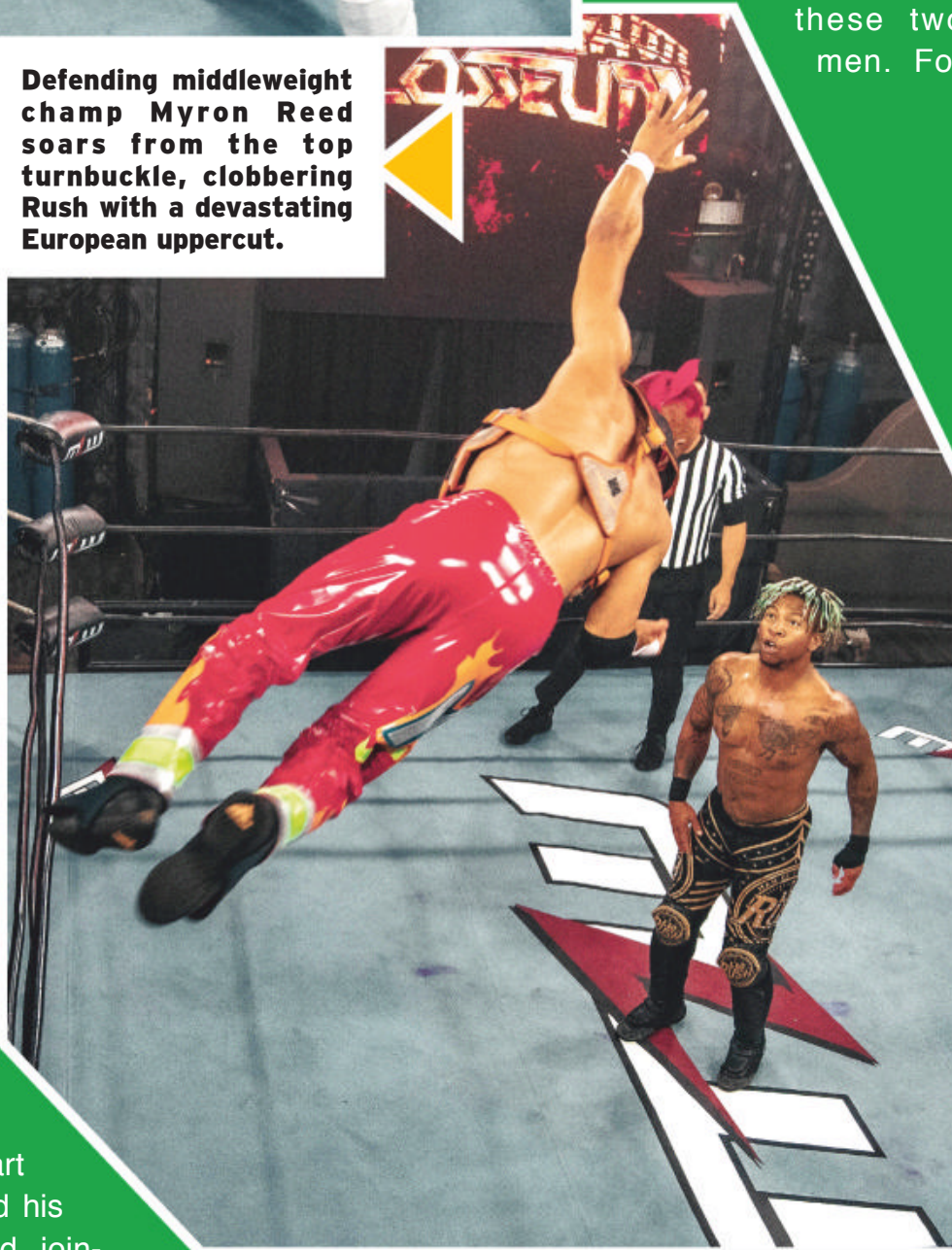
Fortunately, as this was a no-DQ "Bunkhouse Rules" contest, it was able to continue until its natural conclusion.

Though technically sound, the brothers Von Erich seemed perfectly at ease brawling with Brien and Patrick, remaining resilient even as the action spilled to the outside of the building. In the end, Marshall and Ross scored the pinfall on Mike Patrick following a combination Von Erich claw and belly-to-back suplex.

JORDAN OLIVER VS. SIMON GOTCH

Though promoted at the top of the show, this match never actually took place. Gotch, who was set to compete, showed up to the venue later than expected. Later on, Gotch would take part in a sneak attack on Oliver and his Injustice teammate Myron Reed, join-

Defending middleweight champ Myron Reed soars from the top turnbuckle, clobbering Rush with a devastating European uppercut.





The match between Hammerstone and Krugger quickly devolved into a brawl—soon spilling out of the ring and, ultimately, ending in a no-contest.

TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS FROM KINGS OF COLOSSEUM

- 1. Major League Wrestling can do a lot with a little.** Sure, we would've preferred a slightly longer supercard. But, thanks to its weekly *Fusion* program, MLW's got the art of brevity down to a science.
- 2. Lio Rush is 2021's interpromotional superstar.** Much like AJ Styles and Cody Rhodes in previous years, Rush has figured out that a talented wrestler can thrive in myriad top promotions—in his case, MLW, New Japan, AAA, and Game Changer Wrestling.
- 3. Mads Krugger attempted too much too soon.** Even though he technically didn't lose, battling Alex Hammerstone to a draw has arguably subtracted from his mystique by making the monster look slightly more human.
- 4. Daivari belongs in Contra Unit.** Armed with knowledge, experience, and raw grit, the former WWE and Impact star is a perfect fit for MLW's top heel faction.
- 5. Don't sleep on MLW's tag team division.** The week after Kings of Colosseum, the Von Erichs lost their tag belts to Los Parks. With those teams in the mix—along with Injustice, Violence is Forever, and others—the MLW World tag team title will be a highly coveted prize.

one thing, while Reed is the proud member of a team, Rush appears to only be interested in furthering his own career.

Nevertheless, neither of these grapplers underestimated the other, and they delivered what was undoubtedly the best match on the card. Reed and Rush dished out plentiful punishment, and each man seemed to have counters to any move from the other's playbook. Thus, they were forced to dig deep for some truly innovative and unconventional offense—perhaps most notably, Reed's leaping Diamond Cutter on Rush, performed over the top rope and to the floor.

But, ultimately, Reed's big risks were his undoing. He missed his signature No-Cap Splash, which allowed Rush to hit a springboard stunner, followed by his Final Hour frog splash. That was enough for Rush to walk away with the middleweight title in his possession.

ALEX HAMMERSTONE VS. MADS KRUGGER

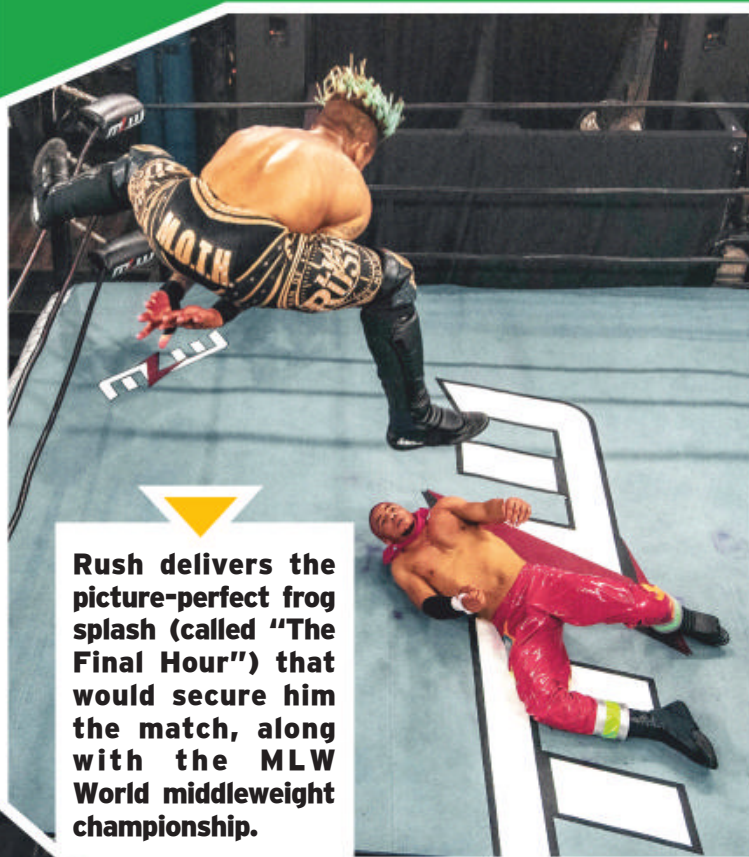
Alexander Hammerstone appears destined to one day reign as MLW World heavyweight champion. But, in the meantime, he needs to focus his attention on defending the company's National openweight title. His opponent at Kings of

RESULTS

The Von Erichs defeated The Dirty Blondes to retain the MLW World tag team championship in 5:53.

Lio Rush defeated Myron Reed to win the MLW middleweight championship in 14:19.

MLW National openweight champion Alexander Hammerstone vs. Mads Krugger ended in a double-countout in 6:20; Hammerstone retained the title.



Rush delivers the picture-perfect frog splash (called "The Final Hour") that would secure him the match, along with the MLW World middleweight championship.



The ludicrously strong Hammerstone punishes "The Black Hand Of Contra" with an Olympic slam.

match quickly became too much for the ring to handle, though, and spilled to the floor. The two big men battled their way up the entrance ramp and to the stage as the official made his 20-count—ending the match (and the show) without a decisive victor. While the non-finish was slightly disappointing, it at least left us wanting to see another showdown between these two powerhouses. ■



Reed's Injustice stablemate Jordan Oliver tends to his fallen partner as Rush savors his new prize.

Colosseum was the mysterious newcomer, Mads Krugger.

The nearly seven-foot-tall Krugger, known as "The Black Hand Of Contra," had only two official matches under his belt prior to this main-event title bout—both squash matches against enhancement talent. Here, he'd be forced to reckon with one of the strongest, most capable athletes in all of MLW.

It is rare that Hammerstone—who has as impressive a physique as anyone on the MLW roster—will find himself in the ring with someone more powerful than he is. He may have found such an opponent in Krugger. The

SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION:
WORLD WONDER RING STARDOM
DATE: 12.20.20
LOCATION: OSAKA, JAPAN

TEXT BY KEVIN McELVANEY

PHOTOS BY YUICHI KOJIMA



Utami Hayashishita addresses fans after her first successful defense of the World of Stardom title.

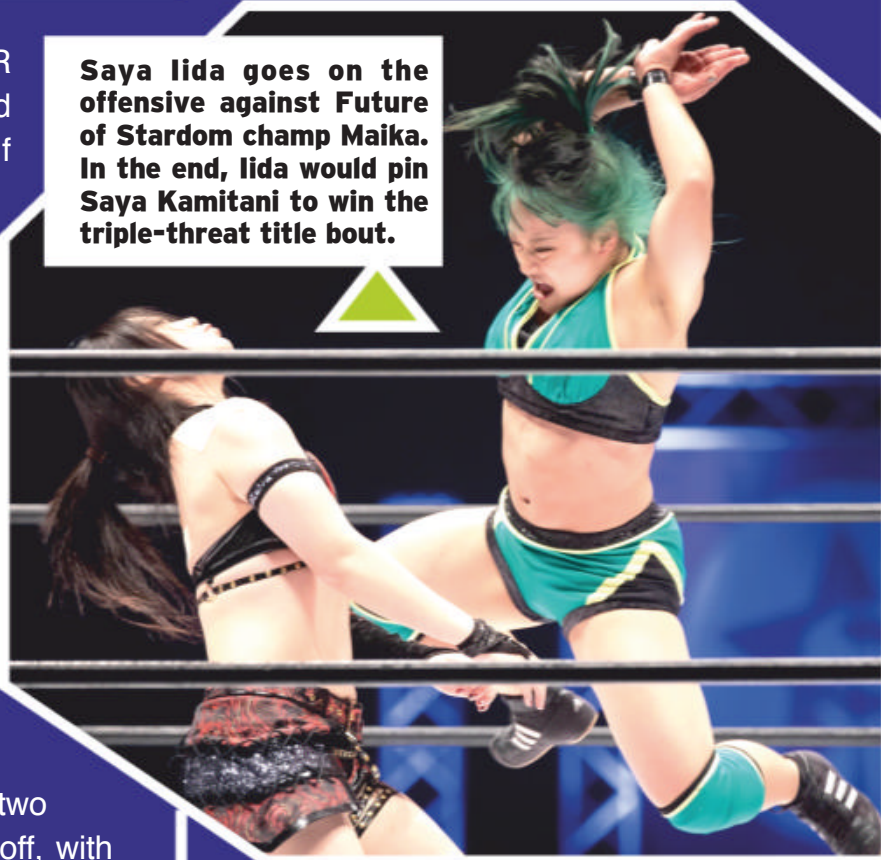


Emotionally and physically exhausted following their 30-minute singles match, Giulia and Syuri showed us their alliance wasn't going anywhere.

AS WORLD WONDER Ring Stardom wound down its 10th year of operations, the stage was set for a super-card where six of the promotion's seven championships would be on the line. The show, held at Osaka Edion Arena, was to be highlighted by contests between allies from two of Stardom's top factions. In the semi-main event, Donna del Mondo leader Giulia put her Wonder of Stardom title up for grabs against stablemate Syuri, whose SWA Undisputed Women's championship was also on the line. The headline match saw two members of Queen's Quest square off, with newly minted World of Stardom champ Utami Hayashishita defending "The Red Belt" against ally Momo Watanabe.

The first match of Osaka Dream Cinderella was a triple-threat for the Future of Stardom belt—a prize accessible only to wrestlers with

Saya Iida goes on the offensive against Future of Stardom champ Maika. In the end, Iida would pin Saya Kamitani to win the triple-threat title bout.



less than two years of experience. Donna del Mondo member Maika faced Saya Kamitani (of Queen's Quest) and Saya Iida (of Mayu Iwatani's STARS group). While many expected Kamitani to win this match, it was the diminutive,



Relative newcomers to Stardom, the pairing of Himeka & Natsupoi proved impressive against future tag champions Bea Priestley & Saki Kashima.

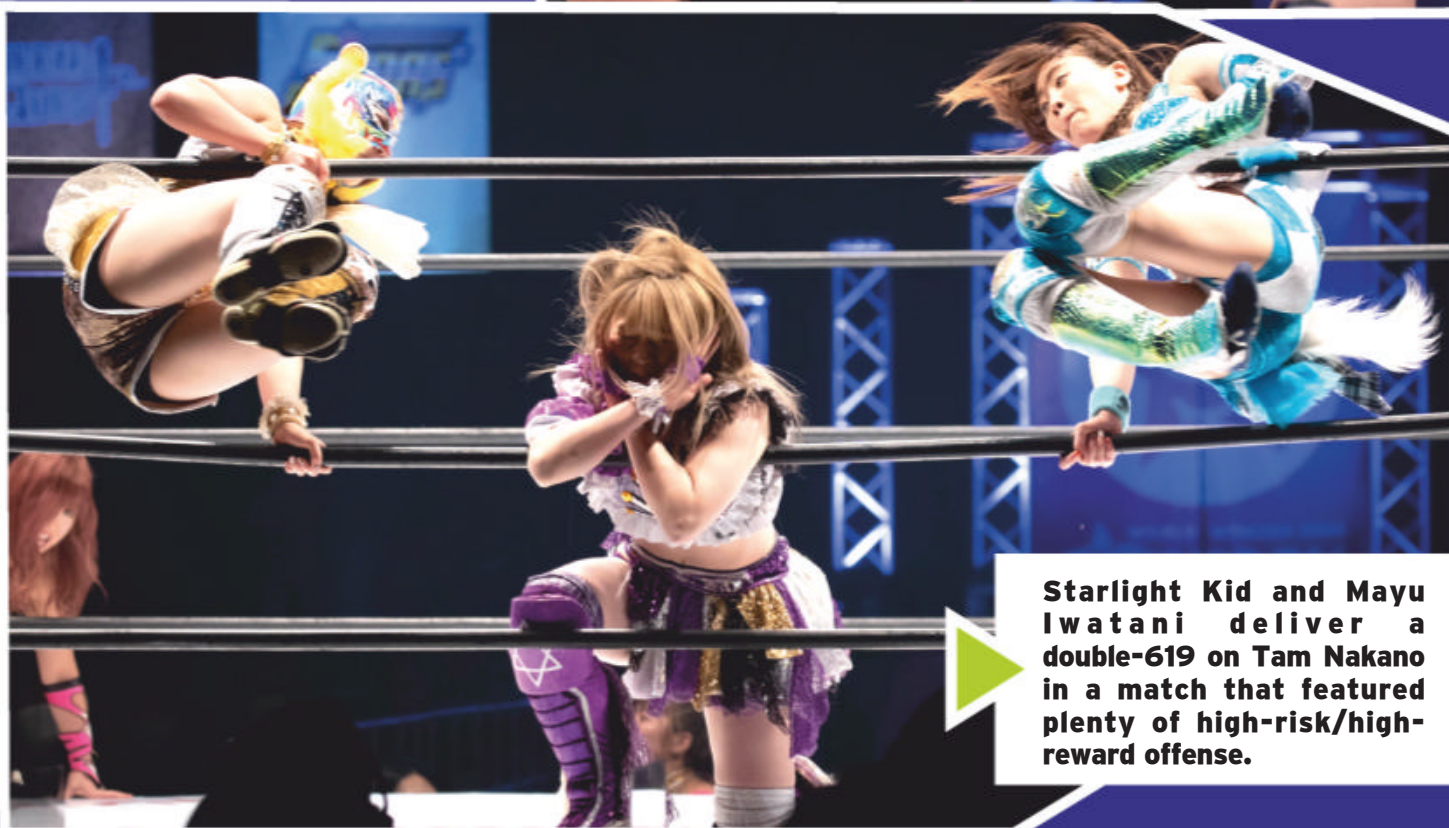
yet powerful lida who proved victorious, following a brainbuster on Kamitani. After the match, lida—who was days away from finishing her second professional year—asked for the eligibility period for the Future of Stardom title to be extended to three years, given that the pandemic shortened the period in which she could compete for the belt. Her request was granted.

Match #2 saw Oedo Tai reps Konami & Natsuko Tora take on

the team of former AEW Women's champ Riho and the increasingly popular Ruaka. At only 16 years of age, Ruaka shows promise, but still has quite a bit to learn. She'll benefit from the mentorship a well-traveled athlete like Riho can provide. Still, Tora and Konami took the match without too much trouble.

In the next bout, Oedo Tai's Bea Priestley & Saki Kashima faced Himeka & Natsupoi of Donna del Mondo. Six days later, Priestley and Kashima would defeat Kamitani & Hayashishita for the Goddess of Stardom title. But, at Osaka Dream Cinderella, they were less fortunate. Moments after hoisting both her opponents up into a torture rack, Himeka once again showed off her strength—executing a huge, running jackknife powerbomb on Kashima for the pinfall.

In a show of sportsmanship, AZM shakes hands with Marvelous Pro's Mei Hoshizuki.



Starlight Kid and Mayu Iwatani deliver a double-619 on Tam Nakano in a match that featured plenty of high-risk/high-reward offense.



Each determined to walk away with their championship reigns intact, Giulia and Syuri tried anything they could muster to win the match. In the end, they both retained their titles following a 30-minute draw.

Stardom's High Speed championship is not unlike Impact's X division title, in that it's meant to showcase high-flyers and high work rates. Match #4 certainly delivered on that front. Champion AZM found a capable challenger in Marvelous Pro Wrestling's Mei Hoshizuki. In the final moments, the two grapplers traded more than a dozen pinning combinations—each resulting in a near-fall—before AZM locked in the deciding inside cradle, keeping the High Speed title with Queen's Quest.

Next up, the Cosmic Angels (Mina Shirakawa, Tam Nakano, & Unagi Sayaka) defended the Artist of Stardom title against STARS representatives Mayu Iwatani, the high-flying Starlight Kid, and Gokigen Death—who recently traded her heavy metal-inspired makeup and attire for the accoutrements of a circus clown. Shirakawa won the match for her team after hitting a modified facebuster on Gokigen Death. Less than a week later, she'd suffer a broken nose while competing at Korakuen Hall, which would keep her out of action for two months.

In what was, by most accounts, the match of the night, Giulia and Syuri competed for the second- and third-most-prestigious titles in Stardom. The two wrestlers knew each other very well, as evidenced by their many counters and reversals. The bout saw numerous technical exchanges in the ring, as well as hard-hitting action on the outside. In the end, the match ended in a 30-minute time-limit draw, with both competitors lying exhausted

TOP 5 SURPRISES AT OSAKA DREAM CINDERELLA

- 1. Giulia and Syuri have a strong bond.** Their individual egos (and friendship) remained intact through a brutal, 30-minute battle for their respective championships.
- 2. Cosmic Angels strike out on their own.** After their win, the trio announced they would no longer be part of the STARS faction.
- 3. Maika's got her eyes on the prize.** Though no longer Future of Stardom champ, she immediately challenged Utami Hayashishita for the World of Stardom title after the main event.
- 4. The Future of Stardom isn't just for rookies.** At least for now, wrestlers in their first three years are in contention for this championship.
- 5. Watch out for Donna del Mondo.** Giulia and Syuri are two of the company's brightest stars, and newcomers Himeka & Natsupoi are a duo to be reckoned with.

RESULTS

Saya Iida defeated Maika and Saya Kamitani in a triple-threat to win the Future of Stardom championship in 8:19.

Konami & Natsuko Tora defeated Riho & Ruaka in 7:05.

Himeka & Natsupoi defeated Bea Priestley & Saki Kashima in 11:05.

AZM defeated Mei Hoshizuki to retain the High Speed championship in 10:31.

Mina Shirakawa, Tam Nakano, & Unagi Sayaka defeated Gokigen Death, Mayu Iwatani, & Starlight Kid to retain the Artist of Stardom championship in 14:00.

Giulia and Syuri wrestled to a 30-minute draw in a match for the Wonder of Stardom and SWA championships.

Utami Hayashishita defeated Momo Watanabe to retain the World of Stardom championship in 24:26.

on the mat. Despite Donna del Mondo being a heel group, Giulia and Syuri openly embraced after the match, their alliance clearly surviving this hard battle.

As promised, the highly anticipated main event saw World of Stardom champ Utami Hayashishita defend her title for the first time since winning it from Mayu Iwatani back in November. She handpicked her ally, Momo Watanabe, as the woman to first challenge her for the belt. Watanabe, who's mostly found success as a tag competitor as of late, was certainly the underdog, but she brought the fight to Hayashishita—a young, though highly decorated champion, who was voted first runner-up in the 2019 voting for *PWF's* Rookie of the Year.

For nearly 25 minutes, the two friends battled valiantly, trading (and kicking out of) various signature maneuvers. Ultimately, Hayashishita would seal the deal by connecting with the Towerhacker Bomb for the three-count. After the match, she congratulated Watanabe on a valiant effort. ■



In the main event, Utami Hayashishita defended her World of Stardom championship against longtime ally Momo Watanabe. Following numerous near-falls, Hayashishita secured the victory with a spinning Towerhacker Bomb (below).



SUPERCARDS 2021

PROMOTION: RING OF HONOR

DATE: 12.10.20

LOCATION: BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

TEXT BY RIGHTEOUS REG

PHOTOS BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS

From left to right: La Bestia del Ring and his sons, RUSH and Dragon Lee, celebrate following RUSH's main-event title match against Brody King.

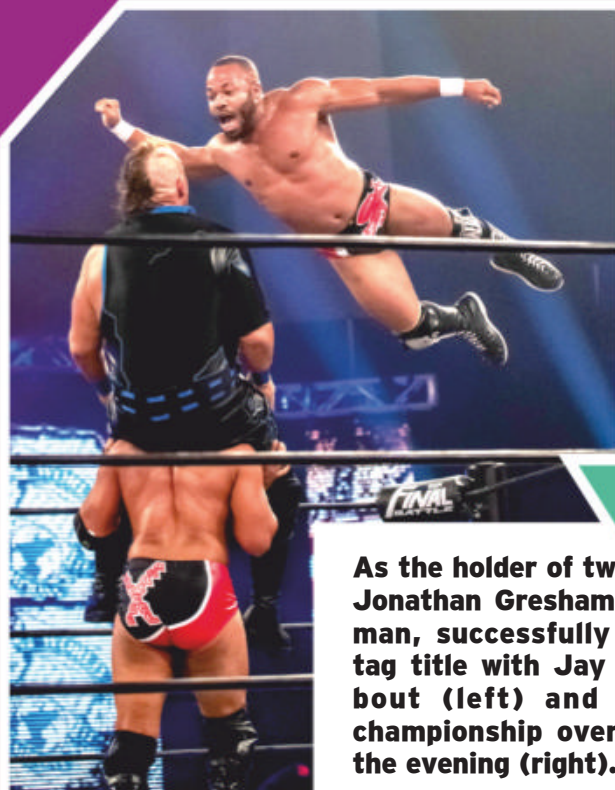


RING OF HONOR hosted its annual year-end event, Final Battle, on December 10, 2020. Unlike previous years, there weren't a lot of feuds being capped off on this show. But, as always, Ring of Honor brought some great wrestling and planted seeds for the future.

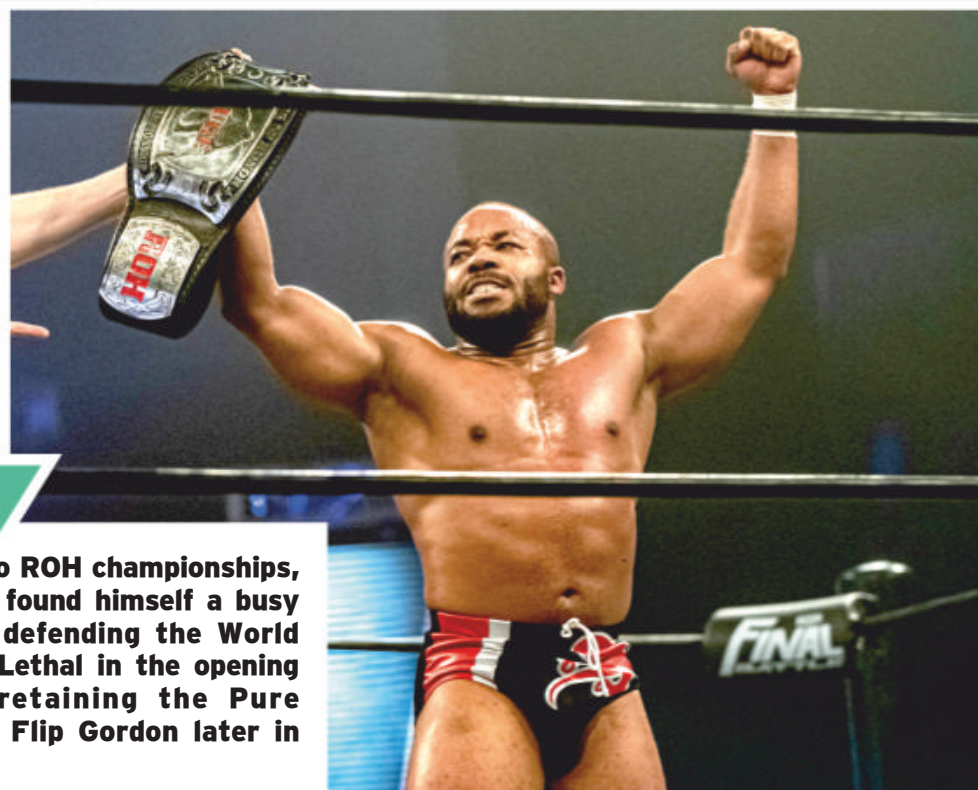
they worked like a well-oiled machine here, claiming the victory after some miscommunication between their opponents led to Gresham rolling up PCO for the win.

Dalton Castle went to battle against Rey Horus in the next match. Castle is still trying to reestablish himself after losing the Ring of Honor

Jonathan Gresham—who was pulling double duty that night—and Jay Lethal were set to defend the Ring of Honor World tag team championship against Mark Briscoe and PCO in the opening match. Briscoe wanted to go at it with another partner as his brother, Jay, pursued the ROH World championship once again. As usual, PCO had to include a couple of his wacky antics in the match. Lethal and Gresham had been teasing a Pure title feud, but



As the holder of two ROH championships, Jonathan Gresham found himself a busy man, successfully defending the World tag title with Jay Lethal in the opening bout (left) and retaining the Pure championship over Flip Gordon later in the evening (right).



SUPERCARDS 2021

FINAL BATTLE



Rey Horus delivers an impressive spinning kick to the face of his opponent, former ROH champion Dalton Castle.

World title a few years ago. Horus—one-third of the Ring of Honor six-man championship team—had Castle spinning in circles with that super quick lucha libre style. After confusing his opponent with arm drags and front-flip dives, Horus surprised him with a flipping wheelbarrow off the top for the 1-2-3—a shocking victory over the former ROH champion.



Shane Taylor levels Jay Briscoe with the Marcus Garvey Driver. Taylor would go on to win the singles contest, putting himself in prime contention for a World title opportunity.



The detestable Brian Johnson gives Danhausen a taste of his own medicine by dumping his opponent's jar of teeth into his mouth. Nevertheless, Danhausen would pick up a DQ victory ... along with an ROH contract.

The deepest feud of the entire show (and the entire company, as of late) was the one between Matt Taven & Mike Bennett (known as “The OG Kingdom”) against former allies Vincent & Bateman of The Righteous. Taven, Bennett, and Vincent are former friends torn apart by the latter’s betrayal at Final Battle 2019. Since then, Vincent has done everything he can to make things personal by involving family. Bennett & Taven were fighting with emotions, and it would cost them later. This match was a brawl—no chain wrestling here. Taven hit a crazy splash from the top rope to the floor on

Vincent. The Kingdom got the victory when they hit Bateman with a backpack stunner/Claymore Kick combo. But The Righteous got the last laugh when Vita VonStarr gained the advantage over Taven and Bennett with a low blow. Vincent & Bateman busted up Bennett’s ankles with a chair and a wooden block while Taven watched ... tied up and helpless.

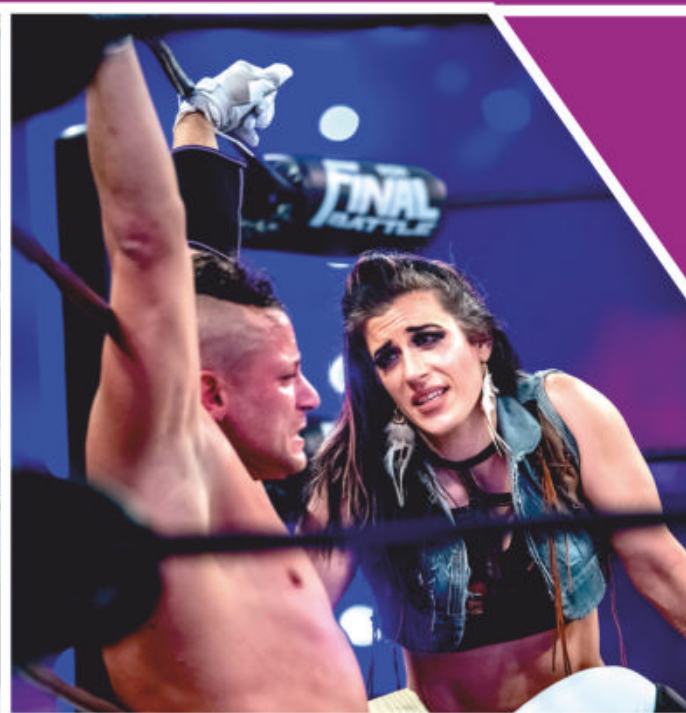
Next up was internet favorite, Danhausen, who touts himself as “Very Nice, Very Evil.” The corpse-painted grappler was set to earn a contract with Ring of Honor, if he could only get the win over Brian Johnson. Danhausen pulled out all his tricks, including playing his music during the match and utilizing his infamous jar of teeth. Johnson, a noted jerk,

SUPERCARDS 2021

FINAL BATTLE



Straight out of Stephen King's *Misery*: Vincent and Bateman use a chair and a wood block to shatter the ankles of Mike Bennett (left). Meanwhile, Vita VonStarr taunts Matt Taven, who can do little else but watch in terror.



Dragon Lee nails Tony Deppen with a poisonrana. Though unsuccessful in his TV title attempt, Deppen showed a lot of heart against one of the world's top high-flyers.



Television championship for over a year, including a period of inactivity due to the pandemic. Deppen reached deep into his moveset, with highlights including a second-rope flipping neckbreaker. But Lee showed why he's the champ, aggressively attacking Deppen until he incinerated him with a knee for the win.

Next, Shane Taylor took on Jay Briscoe in an impromptu bout. Both men were upset they weren't on the Final Battle card and battled like they had something to prove. Taylor *destroyed* Briscoe with a right forearm and clubbing right hands, trying to get a knockout victory. Briscoe hit

bad-mouthed Danhausen on the mic mid-bout. But Danhausen took a page from the Eddie Guerrero playbook, convincing the ref Johnson had hit him with the microphone. With a crafty DQ victory, Danhausen earned his ROH contract.

Tony Deppen earned his way onto the Final Battle card after a victory in a four-way earlier in the night on the Final Battle pre-show. His opponent? The ROH TV champion—representing Los Ingobernables—Dragon Lee. At press time, Lee has held the



Jonathan Gresham executes a breathtaking—though presumably quite painful—German suplex on challenger Flip Gordon.

TOP 5 MOMENTS FROM FINAL BATTLE

1. Jonathan Gresham pulls double duty.

Gresham is one of the best technical wrestlers in the world, so getting to see him wrestle twice in one night is a treat.

2. Dragon Lee vs. Tony Deppen. High-impact match, hard-hitting ... a great showcase for both wrestlers.

3. Shane Taylor beats former World champion Jay Briscoe. Taylor is on his way to having a big 2021 in Ring of Honor.

4. Brody King main-events Final Battle as a relative newcomer. King has now made waves in both Ring of Honor and New Japan Pro-Wrestling, and his star is on the rise.

5. Danhausen earns a contract with a victory over Brian Johnson. Ring of Honor just got a lot more evil.

back with a huge Death Valley Driver. Ultimately, Taylor got the win after a Marcus Garvey Driver and a Fire Thunder Driver. Taylor shocked the world with a victory over a former world champion—putting him in line for a future shot at World champion RUSH.

Back again after successfully defending his World tag team title, Jonathan Gresham put up his Pure championship belt against Flip Gordon. Under Pure rules, there are three rope breaks allowed per wrestler each match—no closed fists, only classic wrestling. Gordon lost a rope break about a minute and a half in, then his second rope break around the three-minute mark.

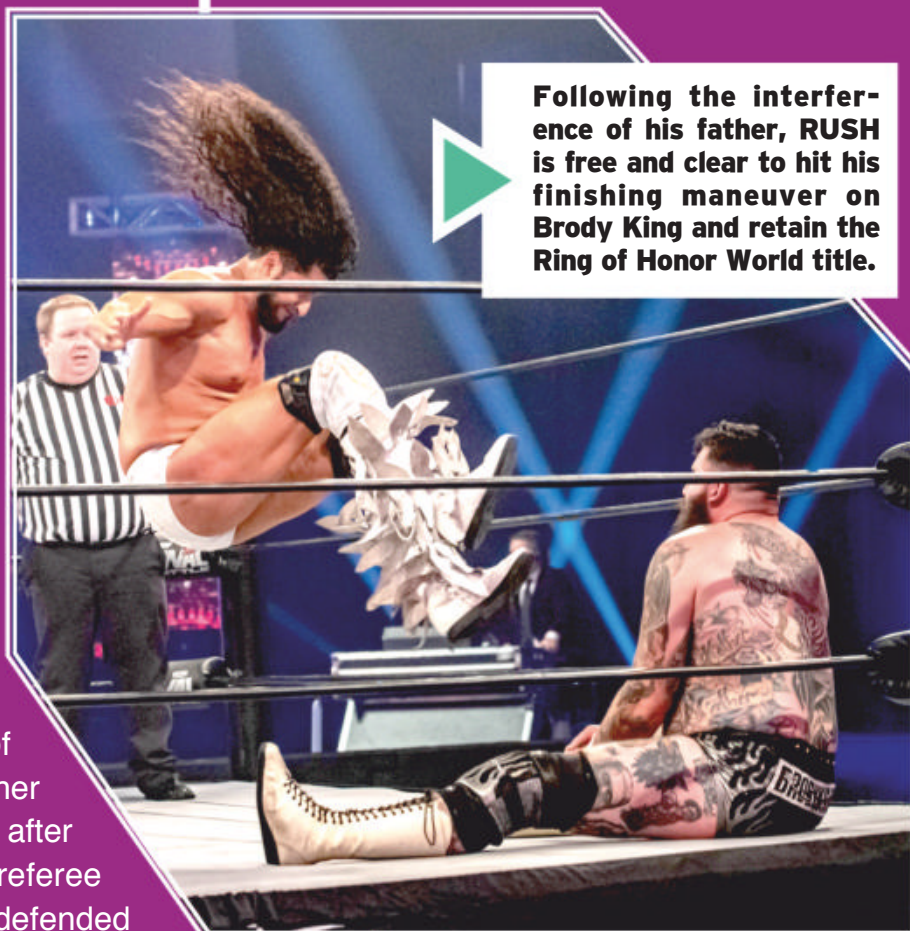
Gresham was clearly in his element, working over his challenger's limbs with holds and strikes. Gordon lost his final rope break seven minutes in, but would not go out easily, stringing together a nice series of moves and forcing the champ to use all of his rope breaks. But, with his back against the wall, the leader of "The Foundation" shifted into another gear, eventually scoring the victory after multiple vicious elbows forced a referee stoppage. Gresham successfully defended

two championships in one night ... a true professional.

In the main event of Final Battle 2020, ROH World champion RUSH defended his championship against number-one contender Brody King. King looked to use his size to win the title, while RUSH aimed to prove why he's one of the best champions in wrestling. A suicide dive from King early in the match garnered him the advantage. But RUSH fired back with a flipping senton over the top rope. Then, he wisely used his champion's advantage to turn the tide of the match, working King around the outside of the ring.

These heel tactics overwhelmed the challenger and really showed why RUSH is such a dominant champion. Later in the match, RUSH rocked King with a huge superplex, but King rebounded with a Boss Man Slam that left both competitors down. Then, Dragon Lee came out to distract the referee while his and RUSH's father, La Bestia del Ring, hit King with a chair. RUSH finished off his opponent with his signature move (Bull's Horns) followed by the pinfall.

The show ended with a standoff between Los Ingobernables and The Foundation (Jonathan Gresham, Jay Lethal, Tracy Williams, and Rhett Titus). As Gresham works to restore honor to ROH, could the World championship be his next prize? ■



Following the interference of his father, RUSH is free and clear to hit his finishing maneuver on Brody King and retain the Ring of Honor World title.



WORLD TITLE UPDATE

IN ORDER TO help our readers separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff, *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* has historically designated a limited number of official “world” championships—recognizing the heavy-weight, Women’s, and tag team champions of a select few promotions as legitimate. This is in line with the way that certain boxing publications—most notably, *The Ring*—would let readers know which titles were the real deal.

Over the years, countless championships have been touted as “world titles” by their promoters. But, with a handful of exceptions, *PWI* has typically not referred to those prizes in the same way. Though our magazine has largely moved away from its kayfabe roots, we still feel there is value in the formal world title designation—calling someone a “world champion” only when the title truly fits.

With the wrestling industry becoming bigger and more diverse—indeed, more closely resembling the global “territory system” of old than it has in years—we felt it was high time to recognize some championships (and champions) long worthy of formal recognition. Criteria for world title designation includes:

- ★ Prominence of the promotion
- ★ Positioning of the championship
 - Not a secondary title
 - Must be the undisputed top prize of a promotion, division, or weight class
- ★ Quality of competition
- ★ International defenses or opponents
- ★ Influence of the championship
 - Recognition *outside* of home promotion
- ★ Historical lineage

AS OF 2020, *PWI* OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZES THESE WORLD-CLASS CHAMPIONSHIPS

WORLD WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT

- ★ WWE/Universal championships
- ★ Raw/Smackdown Women’s titles
- ★ Raw/Smackdown tag team titles
- ★ Women’s tag team championship

ALL ELITE WRESTLING

- ★ World championship
- ★ World Women’s championship
- ★ World tag team championship

NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING

- ★ IWGP heavyweight championship
- ★ IWGP tag team championship
- ★ IWGP junior heavyweight championship

LUCHA LIBRE AAA

- ★ World tag team championship
- ★ World Trios championship
- ★ Mega championship
- ★ Reina de Reinas championship
- ★ World cruiserweight championship

EFFECTIVE JANUARY 2021, WE'VE EXTENDED WORLD- CHAMPIONSHIP STATUS TO THESE TITLES

IMPACT WRESTLING

- ★ World championship
- ★ Knockouts championship
- ★ World tag team championship
- ★ Knockouts tag team championship

RING OF HONOR

- ★ World heavyweight championship
- ★ World tag team championship

NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE

- ★ World heavyweight championship
- ★ World Women's championship
- ★ World tag team championship

CONSEJO MUNDIAL DE LUCHA LIBRE

- ★ World heavyweight championship
- ★ World tag team championship
- ★ World Trios championship
- ★ World Women's championship

ALL JAPAN PRO WRESTLING

- ★ Triple Crown championship
- ★ World tag team championship
- ★ World junior heavyweight championship

WORLD WONDER RING STARDOM

- ★ World of Stardom championship
- ★ Goddess of Stardom championship

MAJOR LEAGUE WRESTLING

- ★ World heavyweight championship
- ★ World middleweight championship
- ★ World tag team championship

WAIT! WHAT ABOUT ...

NXT?

NXT produces a top-tier product, but it's still *technically* developmental. In WWE's own ecosystem, NXT champions are not called "world champions," while WWE/Universal champs are. For now, we'll follow suit.

THE X DIVISION?

While the lineage is impressive, the X division belt is promoted as a secondary title by Impact. It is not the top prize for a weight class, nor is it in any way exclusive to certain wrestlers.

NWA/ROH TV TITLES?

Though called "World Television championships" by their home promotions, these are effectively secondary titles for the heavyweight division.

OTHER CMLL TITLES?

CMLL's myriad weight-based titles are either defended infrequently or are somehow disputed (i.e., variations of the light heavyweight title, begging to be unified).

OTHER PROMOTIONS?

Rest assured: We are keeping a close eye on ALL the sport's major promotions and championships. This list is subject to growth and change ...

WEDNESDAY NIGHT FIGHT

BY HARRY BURKETT

TRIBUTE TO BRODIE LEE

AEW faced perhaps the ultimate challenge on December 30: how to say goodbye to one of the industry's top stars *and* present two hours of compelling wrestling action while grieving family members are on hand and a mournful locker room tries to recover. And, oh, do this on live television with very little notice.

Tony Khan and Cody Rhodes led the effort to meet the challenge magnificently, revealing the heart, soul, and values of the young company during a heart-wrenching time. The episode drew comparisons to the May 24, 1999, edition of *Raw*, a two-hour tribute to Owen Hart, who

had fallen more than 70 feet to his death at a WWF pay-per-view the previous night.

There were similarities: Like Hart, Brodie Lee was loved and respected by his peers, and he was known to be a dedicated family man. Lee's kindness in life made his death even harder to bear.

Khan, Rhodes, and the AEW powers-that-be had no other mission than to honor Lee the best they could, while acknowledging the pain his family, friends, and fans were going through. The truth is that edition of *Dynamite* deserves an Emmy. While AEW's efforts would go largely

unnoticed by the mainstream entertainment media, they weren't lost on wrestling fans, who tuned in 977,500 viewers strong to remember Brodie Lee.

Just as Steve Austin delivered an iconic moment by raising a beer to Hart's memory to close out that unprecedented night in 1999, Khan did the same in 2020 by presenting Brodie Lee Jr. (best known as "-1," the adorable front-row supporter of The Dark Order) with the TNT championship belt, which had been held by his father.

NXT also noted the passing of Lee, who, of course, was known as Luke Harper in WWE. No surprise, that show experienced one of its lower viewership numbers—586,000—that night.

AEW vs. NXT VIEWER NUMBERS

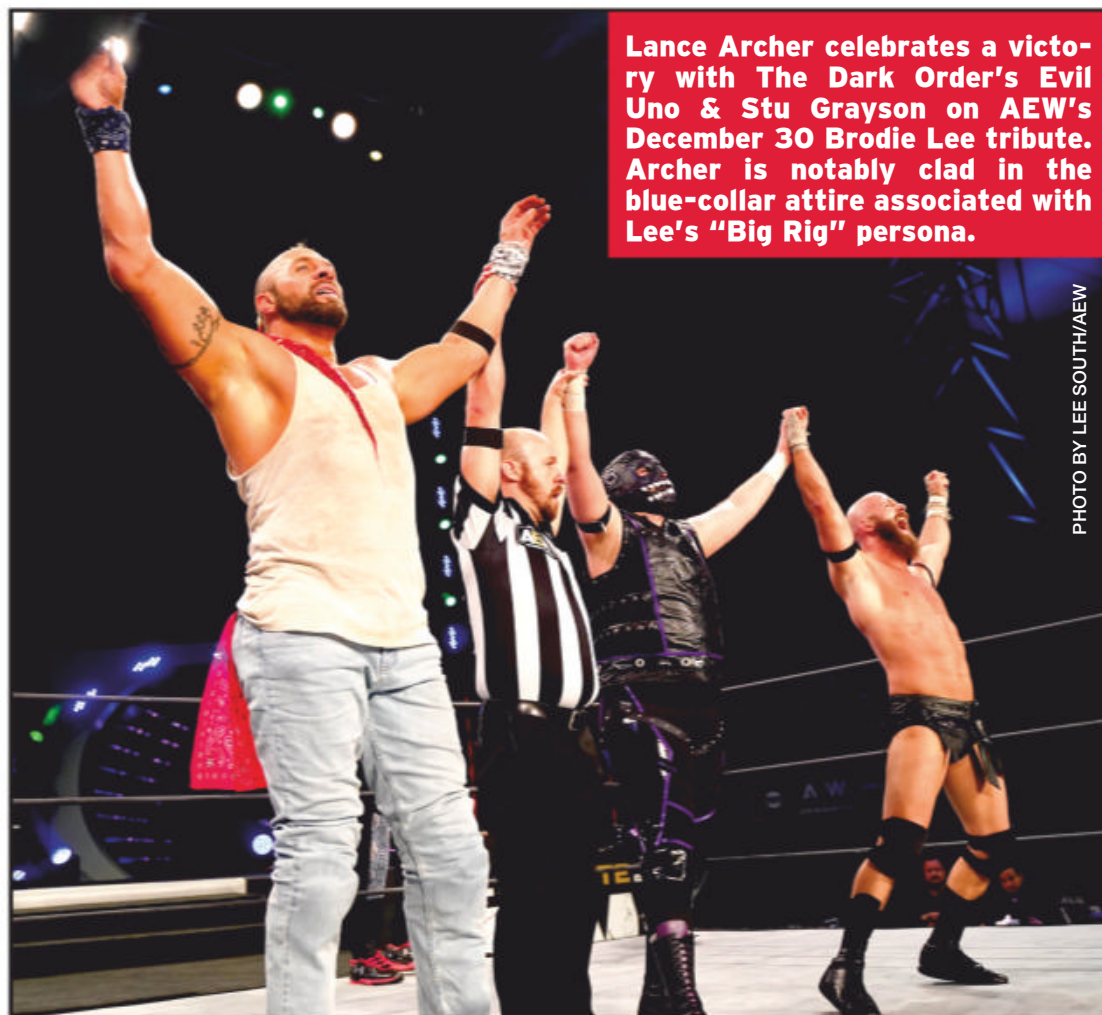
AEW [TNT]

December 23: 775,000
December 30: 977,000
January 6: 662,000
January 13: 762,000
January 20: 854,000
January 27: 734,000

NXT [USA]

December 23: 698,000
December 30: 586,000
January 6: 641,000
January 13: 551,000
January 20: 659,000
January 27: 720,000

Snapshot analysis: AEW's immediate goal is to achieve one million viewers on a weekly basis. NXT's goal is to surpass AEW. It could happen, with *NXT* within striking distance many weeks. Look at January 6: *Dynamite* edged out *NXT* by only 21,000 viewers. It's close, folks.



Lance Archer celebrates a victory with The Dark Order's Evil Uno & Stu Grayson on AEW's December 30 Brodie Lee tribute. Archer is notably clad in the blue-collar attire associated with Lee's "Big Rig" persona.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

THE CAPITOL RIOT EFFECT

While viewers were already braced for a raucous night on January 6, with both AEW and NXT presenting themed specials (“New Year’s Evil” and “New Year’s Smash,” respectively), no one could have predicted the real world was going to be a lot uglier than any wrestling show. Protesters supporting U.S. President Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol, resulting in the deaths of five people and diverting many viewers to cable-news programs.

The top 32 cable shows among the coveted 18- to 49-year-old demographic, in fact, were all on CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News. *Dynamite* dropped to 662,000, from 977,000 the previous week. Conversely, *NXT*’s average viewership

was higher on January 6, reaching 641,000 after its big drop (due to AEW’s Brodie Lee tribute show) the previous week.

DOES HE OR DOESN’T HE?

Conflicting reports were circulating throughout the industry regarding whether Tony Khan wanted to add a third hour of AEW TV to the cable schedule. As it turns out, the AEW President does want a third hour of programming, but not a third hour of *Dynamite*.

“It will be a third hour with WarnerMedia and great exposure for us,” Khan told Renee Paquette on her new podcast, *Oral Sessions*. “We’ve got *Dark*, which has been a great platform for wrestlers on YouTube and other streaming platforms.

There will be more opportunities and real estate for our wrestlers.

“We’re not oversaturating. I definitely don’t want to do three hours of *Dynamite*, and I feel strongly about keeping our ‘Big Four’ pay-per-views.”

Additional programming has been a goal since January 2020, when WarnerMedia renewed *Dynamite*’s contract through 2023 in a \$175-million deal. The original plan was reportedly to move *AEW Dark* to TNT, and to create more of a “docu-drama feel” to complement the matches on *Dark*.

While many fans are relieved that AEW will maintain its strong YouTube presence with *Dark*, the series has been criticized in recent months for its languishing pace, with some episodes running as long as two hours. And, quite frankly, Dr. Britt Baker’s “Waiting Room” segments can be as excruciating as a root canal.

Khan and TNT made the right call. Adding a third hour would make *Dynamite* seem as laborious as *Dark*, as it did for *WCW Monday Nitro* in the late-1990s and *Raw* in recent years.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT WARRIOR TIMOTHY THATCHER

Before the January 20 edition of *NXT*, it seemed Timothy Thatcher’s best performances were in matches where he came out on the losing end: a loss to then-North American champion Damian Priest on the September 8 *NXT* and a loss to Tommaso Ciampa at *TakeOver: WarGames* on December 6. Yet, on this night, Thatcher rebounded against Ciampa with his second win inside the brutal “Fight Pit.” As of this writing, he’s Ciampa’s partner in the *Dusty Rhodes Classic*. Good job, TT.



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UNFAIR ADVANTAGE?

NXT has surpassed *Dynamite* only nine times in the 65 head-to-head battles between the two programs, and critics have suggested the black-and-gold brand is at a distinct disadvantage against AEW because it still serves as a developmental system for *Raw* and *Smackdown*.

The recent losses of Keith Lee and Bianca Belair are examples of that. But, then again, WWE can always airdrop its biggest stars to boost *NXT*’s ratings, as it has with Finn Balor and Charlotte Flair. Adam Cole bristles at the notion that *NXT* is not an equal brand to *Raw* and *Smackdown*.

Well-intentioned fans on Twitter, demanding Cole’s “call-up” to one of the main rosters, prompted this response from the former *NXT* champion: “WWE *NXT* is main roster. No debate. End of story.” □

LIGHT IT UP LIKE *DYNAMITE*



PHOTO BY MARVELOUS PRO WRESTLING

In the pandemic's early days, Masha Slamovich was able to continue her training at the celebrated Marvelous Dojo—and, when it was safe to do so, she eagerly returned to competing in the ring.

WILL MASHA SLAMOVICH'S INTERNATIONAL GAMBLE PAY OFF?

TEXT BY LAUREN FOUNDS



PHOTOS BY BRIAN KRIEGER

Slamovich has followed in the footsteps of the Dynamite Kid by displaying a fierce tenacity in rings around the world. Her nickname, "The Russian Dynamite," pays tribute to her grappling hero.



IN 2020, THE world was faced with a global pandemic that sent the lives of millions into a tailspin. As COVID-19 began to wreak its havoc on North America, independent wrestler Masha Slamovich was faced with the biggest decision of her young career—one that would forever impact her trajectory in professional wrestling.

Almost seven thousand miles away from home, Slamovich has now been living and training for over a year in Chiba, Japan. What was originally intended to be her second tour of the country—and the first with the internationally acclaimed Marvelous Dojo—transformed into a much longer stay.

It all began in January of 2020, when the Moscow-born grappler embarked on a three-month journey to Japan. She was looking forward to what the year would bring. Slamovich planned to fly into Tampa on April 1 to perform at indie shows throughout WrestleMania weekend. The rest of 2020 would include a tour of the Canadian Maritimes, a return to her homeland of Russia (where she would see family), and subsequent plans to get booked all over the United States. Sadly, show after show was canceled, and she was left heartbroken.

As winter waned in New York City—which Slamovich still calls home—the threat of COVID-19 became more obvious, and government shut-downs became widespread. With international travel suspended, she had a tough decision to make. SHIMMER tag champ Delmi Exo, who was also training at the Marvelous Dojo, opted to fly home to the United States. But Slamovich chose to stay in Japan, even though her return trip would be postponed indefinitely. For the young wrestler, this decision was an easy one to make.

“Once I got the opportunity, I knew it was a once in a lifetime chance, and one I’d been waiting on for years,” said Slamovich. “I took maybe 10 minutes to consider and reached out to a mentor, who supported my desire to stay. I immediately wrote back the Marvelous office, and the deal was sealed. It wasn’t a hard choice. It was a moment I knew I stood at the crossroads to my future, and I’m happy I made the call I did.”

She continued: “I made a joke to Delmi in the moment that I might never return to America and told her, in all seriousness, that I would stay here as long as it took ... until 2021, if I had to. And, it turns out, I was just speaking premonitions of my future.”

The choice to stay demonstrated just how truly passionate and determined Slamovich is. “It takes a special kind of person to be able to stay in a country for almost a year without their close friends or family,” said Delmi Exo. “Many people say they’d love to do it. I don’t think they truly understand what that sacrifice looks like.”

The Moscow-born grappler learned the ropes in the U.S., paid her dues in Canada, and, at the onset of a pandemic, opted to continue training in Japan instead of flying home. After betting on herself, she’s hoping to hit the jackpot.

PHOTO BY MOMOJI KAWAII



Slamovich delivers a devastating burning hammer to Mikoto Shindo during their singles bout at the August 24 Marvelous event in Tokyo.

But it seems Slamovich made a wise decision. The vast majority of American indie wrestlers spent the better part of 2020 unable to work or train, but, for Slamovich, training and wrestling has never stopped. Living at the Marvelous Dojo has afforded her the opportunity to hone her craft and add to her growing resume.

During her time in Japan, the 22-year-old has toured with Marvelous and wrestled all over Japan, including Osaka and Aichi. She has debuted for the prominent Sendai Girls and Ice Ribbon promotions, and was on the bill for the Joshi supercard, Assemble, in November. In August, she competed in a dream match, teaming with Meiko Satomura at Sendai Girls' Pro Wrestling.

Since beginning her training at age 16 under the tutelage of WWE Hall-of-Famer Johnny Rodz, Slamovich has been obsessed with the world of professional wrestling, striving to emulate her heroes—most notably, the Dynamite Kid. Given her appreciation of the Stampede Wrestling style, it seems appropriate that she cut her teeth in The Great White North.



Every other month, Marvelous trainees take part in the promotion's pet adoption events. It offers them a chance to give back to the community.

"I had always joked to my mother that I was following in the footsteps of my idols," Slamovich said. "I'd [traveled] to Canada so frequently, it seemed I lived there in 2018-19. It wasn't by choice, it was all just falling into place, and I joked that I'd leave to Japan for 13 years the way Dynamite had left to Canada for so long. She wasn't thrilled with the idea, but she knew there was no stopping it. Here in Japan, it's constant training and self-discipline, and honing the craft I love, and falling in love with it more."

Slamovich's nickname, "The Russian Dynamite," pays homage to her hero. And her work ethic is truly explosive—she spends her days at the Marvelous Dojo, learning the art of *puroresu* under Chigusa Nagayo and Takumi Iroha. Her schedule allows her to train, work out, and enjoy the sights and scenes of the beautiful country.

Slamovich lives at the dojo with 10 other women and over a dozen cats and dogs. Pets are an important part of the dojo life. In fact, Marvelous hosts a bi-monthly adoption event collaborating with local shelters and rescues. The promotion's devoted students work at the event.



Last summer, Slamovich had the honor of wrestling alongside the great Meiko Satomura, defeating KAORU & Ryo Mizunami in a tag match at Azalea Taisho Hall in Osaka.



Slamovich's time in Japan has been the most formative period in her young career. Having the chance to train and learn from some of the best *joshi* wrestlers has been an invaluable experience—one that, without a doubt, will influence the rest of her career. In 2021, she'll be making her long-awaited return to the U.S. And, when she does, *watch out*.

"I'd like to have more opportunities to show the American independent circuit what I'm capable of and what they've been missing out on," she said. "Post-pandemic, I look forward to returning to places such as Limitless Wrestling, Beyond, and Battle Club Pro, and look to expand into places like PWG, Black Label Pro, Zelo Pro, United Wrestling Network, and the NWA and AEW."

At 22 years old, most young adults are still looking to discover their passions in life and figure out where the future will lead them. Slamovich is a rarity, as she was seemingly born to do only one thing—and that is to be

a successful professional wrestler. With a resume that already includes performing all over the continental United States, Japan, Canada, Puerto Rico, Russia, and the Dominican Republic, she is determined to make her pro wrestling dreams come true.

Last year, Masha Slamovich came to a fork in the road. Though many would have chosen the path of safety and returned home during an uncertain time, Slamovich chose to stay in a foreign land and hone her craft. It was a gamble, to be sure. But, if she becomes a star in the wrestling industry, she may very well owe it to the leap of faith she took last winter. □

Back in 2018, Slamovich tries in vain to beat current Impact star Tasha Steelz at a Warriors of Wrestling show. Upon returning to the U.S. indies, "The Russian Dynamite" will have a lot more wisdom and experience from her time in Japan. Her opponents had better not underestimate her!



PHOTO BY BRIAN KRIEGER

NO SIDESHOWS NO QUOTAS

JUST US

DISPATCHES FROM THE WRESTLING REVOLUTION

TEXT BY JAMIE SENEGAL

A five-year vet of the U.S. indie circuit, Jamie Senegal is amazed and encouraged by the recent achievements of her fellow LGBTQ+ wrestlers.



PHOTO BY SADIËL "SPEEDY" RUIZ

PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

Thanks to his technical skill and undeniable "it factor," Effy has become one of the fastest rising stars on the independent scene.



Senegal is an independent wrestler—and longtime *PWI* reader—who's fought for the inclusion of openly gay, bisexual, and gender non-conforming athletes. With numerous LGBTQ+ wrestlers now in the national spotlight, she has asked to celebrate those success stories in her own words.

THERE WAS A time when the LGBTQ+ community had no real representation in pro wrestling. Sexuality and gender identity were reduced to gimmicks, or a way for someone to get a cheap pop. Still, there was always a reaction ... which left us daydreaming that there would be a day when legitimate queer people would be able to perform in a ring in front of those crowds, getting even louder reactions. Over the last five years, wrestling has grown to include some of the greatest LGBTQ+ athletes to ever compete in the squared circle. It feels like we went from five or six “out” performers to dozens overnight.

“LGBTQ+ talent are opening doors with new wrestling styles and storytelling,” said Effy, an indie fan favorite who ranked #77 in last year’s *PWI* “500.” “Larger companies are following in our footsteps after seeing the groundswell of new support and audiences broadening, because we give them what no one else can.”

These athletes have never taken “no” for an answer. They have knocked down walls so, unlike in the past, LGBTQ+ youth can have a wide variety of wrestling heroes to look up to. While their per-

sonalities and styles vary, there is one thing all of these wrestlers have in common: a desire to do things differently.

“They think we are all the same. It’s our job to prove them wrong,” said independent wrestler Saint Synclair. “All of us have different looks, wrestling styles, and flavors to offer. We ain’t no sideshow act, and we ain’t about to meet a quota for a stereotypical ‘queer wrestler.’”

Sadly, many of us have been overlooked or taken as a joke. Before we finally broke down doors, we had them slammed in our faces multiple times. A decade ago, there weren’t enough of us to actually spark a revolution. We didn’t have the voice that we’ve now built for ourselves. It was almost acceptable to be told we couldn’t be on a show because of who we were. Dare I say, we LGBTQ+ wrestlers were in the same position that women wrestlers of the past were in.

So, we all banded together and stopped allowing others to manage us. We stopped allowing ourselves to be a sideshow performance. LGBTQ+ wrestling became the main event, represented across the industry by names like Cassandro El Exotico, Mercedes Martinez, Saint Synclair, Sonny

Kiss, Jake Atlas, Eddy McQueen, Candy Lee, Kiera Hogan, Diamante, Anthony Bowens, Devon Monroe, Jey Dewhurst,



PHOTOS BY BASIL MAHMUD



Senegal cites the 2019 match between current NXT star Mercedes Martinez and celebrated Mexican grappler Cassandro as a pivotal moment in contemporary pro wrestling.



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Jake Atlas battles Santos Escobar for the NXT cruiser-weight title in November 2020. An openly gay wrestler who lets his impressive ring work speak for itself, Atlas is a positive role model for young fans.

Tyler Klein, Calvin Couture, Kaydin Pierre, Anthony Gaines, Nyla Rose, Jared Evans, Visage, Bobbi Diamond, “Neon” Cassius, VENY, Allie Kat, Effy, Still Life with Apricots and Pears, Ashley Vox, Leyla Hirsch, Erica Leigh, AC Mack, Killian McMurphy, Jordan Blade, Mike Parrow, Keita Murray, Dark Sheik, Mariah Moreno, Billy Dixon—and many more of us have gone above and beyond to break the mold and show that we *can* do it and that we do have a place in professional wrestling.

“The camaraderie that we have backstage is the most important thing, in my opinion, because we are more powerful as a unit,” said AEW star Sonny Kiss. “To have a dialogue between all of us athletes is so impactful. When we all have this genuine love and respect for one another, it shows in our work. It makes the time we share in the ring with one another larger than life.”

On Sunday June 30th, 2019, at the Logan Square Auditorium in Chicago, Illinois, RISE held what could potentially go down as one of the most important wrestling events in history: Pride and Joy. This was the first mainstream wrestling show centered around the LGBT+ community.

Pride and Joy ushered in a whole new audience of wrestling fans. There were so many people who had never gone to a wrestling show before and fell in love with the outrageous, in-your-

face characters who performed that evening. The main event was one of the most thrilling matches I’ve ever witnessed: “The Latina Sensation” Mercedes Martinez vs. Cassandro El Exotico. Not only was this match a showdown for the ages between two icons of the squared circle, but it was such a powerful statement.

In many ways, that match put LGBTQ+ wrestling on the map—exactly where it has always deserved to be. Pride and Joy brought all of us together as a family, along with the fans, who are a part of the

community, who felt like they had nowhere they could fit in. In that building, we found what we’ve always wanted: acceptance.

Fast forward to October 10th, 2020, in Indianapolis, where Effy’s Big Gay Brunch took place. It served as a reminder that, even during the trying times we’ve all been going through, pro wrestling



PHOTOS BY EARL GARDNER

continues to shine. With matches like Sonny Kiss vs. Cassandro El Exotico, AC Mack & Ashton Starr vs. Team Sea Stars, and a technical showcase between DARK Sheik and Still Life with Apricots and Pears, this event was widely celebrated by indie wrestling fans (and even trended on Twitter). For my money, Future Clash champ Devon Monroe stole the show when he won the Twink Gauntlet.

"I'm so grateful to be alongside my peers as we continue to represent and take wrestling to the next level," Monroe said later.

To be sure, being backstage at the Brunch was an incredible experience. We all knew that what we were doing was special. There was an overall "big-show" feeling, because we knew that, once again, it was time to step up and change the game. And we'd do it by being ourselves.

"I learned how crucial self-love and acceptance is through professional wrestling," said indie standout Keita Murray, who's recently been seen on

Though not yet a champion in AEW, Sonny Kiss is tremendously popular and has plenty of potential. Like everyone else in the locker room, Kiss has worked hard to hone her craft and earn the admiration of fans.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

Championship Wrestling from Hollywood. "Once I became unapologetic and accepted myself, everyone else did, too."

Today, LGBTQ+ wrestling is thriving, with major companies signing some of the top stars of the independents. Sonny Kiss, Nyla Rose, and Anthony Bowens are all under contract with AEW. Rose is a former World Women's champion and a fierce, respectable competitor. Meanwhile, Kiss is killing it alongside Joey Janela. Last November, Ashton Starr appeared on *AEW Dark*, which was an awesome sight to see! Diamante is also on AEW TV frequently. WWE has quite a few LGBTQ+ talents under its belt right now, including Jake Atlas, Mercedes Martinez, Sonya Deville, Shayna Baszler, and Tegan Nox. Every single person mentioned is killing it in their own way and quickly making a name for themselves within the company.

One thing you might notice about all these wrestlers is that, apart from being members of the LGBTQ+ community, they have very little in common. We all have characteristics that set us apart from one another. There are so many unique flavors for everyone's taste buds!

But there's another thing we *do* share: We all worked so hard for this. Our journey has been intense, passionate, challenging, emotional, and fun. Honestly, I still can't quite put into words how good it feels seeing LGBTQ+ wrestling flourish!



The monstrous Parrow bested about a dozen opponents in the "Twink Gauntlet" at Effy's Big Gay Brunch, including Molly McCoy (left, trying their best). That changed when Devon Monroe stepped in and won the match (above, slaying the proverbial Goliath).

BORN November 3, 1989 in Durango, Mexico ... Third-gen luchador's relatives include Brillante (father), Jose "El Moro" Andrade (grandfather), and numerous uncles ... Made in-ring debut at 13 when Brillante signed a waiver for him to compete ... Adopted the name Brillante Jr. ... Early rivalry with uncle Zafiro set precedent for winning high-stakes Lucha de Apuesta matches ... 2007 CMLL signing saw him become La Sombra ... Breakthrough partnership with Mistico paved way for tag, trios, and NWA Welterweight gold by age 18 ... Rivalry with El Felino and Puma King raged for months in 2010, with El Felino losing his mask at Dos Leyendas ... Notched second Trios reign with defining win over Hiroshi Tanahashi, Okumura, and Taichi ... Crossed Pacific to compete in Best of Super Juniors 2010, finishing sixth in his bracket ... Saw one-and-a-half-year tag title reign with Volador Jr. ended by Mr. Aguila and Hector Garza ... Unmasked Olimpico at CMLL's 77th Anniversary show ... Back in Japan, pinned Jushin Liger in 2011 Wrestle Kingdom tag match to earn a shot at "Thunder's" CMLL Middleweight title ... Came up short in that effort ... This and G1 Climax losses typified up-and-down year ... Beat Averno to become CMLL Universal champion ... Stunned in Welterweight title loss to Negro Casas, concluding reign at 337 days ... Regrouped in January 2013, trading wins with Shinsuke Nakamura to capture NJPW's IWGP Intercontinental championship ... Briefly realigned with old rival Volador Jr. before beating him in a

Mask vs. Mask match at CMLL's 80th Anniversary Show ... Fans were not receptive, leading to a major change in his philosophy ... Subsequent Los Ingobernables alliance with Rush and La Mascara proved fruitful ... Despite promising partnership with Naito, struggled in 2013 and 2014 NJPW World Tag Leagues ... Plummeted in rankings with Universal title tourney loss to Ultimo Guerrero and subsequent Middleweight title loss ... 2015 involvement in heated incident with fans in Guadalajara did little to bolster reputation ... Unmasked at 82nd Anniversary show, showing his face for the first time in a stunning loss to Atlantis ... Battled Rush before leaving CMLL in November ... Shocked many by immediately signing with WWE ... Despite language barriers, things picked up after NXT debut as Andrade "Cien" Almas ... Attacked tag partner Cedric Alexander, aligning with Zelina Vega ... Standout 2017 rivalries with Roderick Strong and Johnny Gargano left Andrade seemingly poised for NXT gold ... Finally upset brand's champion Drew McIntyre at TakeOver: War Games ... Five-star-rated defense against Gargano in January earned him much praise ...

Made Royal Rumble debut the next night ... Seemingly focused on a main roster transition, lost the NXT title to Aleister Black ... With Vega, he departed for Smackdown ... Looked impressive in non-title loss to WWE champ AJ Styles ... Found success in feud with Rusev and Lana ... Shortened his name to Andrade in January ... 2019 proved frustrating, with key losses for the U.S. and IC titles, as well as in the WrestleMania battle royal, Money in the Bank ladder match, and King of the Ring tournament ... Biggest win may have been behind the curtain when Andrade began dating Charlotte Flair ... Late-year transition to Raw paid dividends—with U.S. title win over Rey Mysterio—before Andrade's suspension under WWE's Wellness Policy ... Upon return in 2020, forged partnership with Angel Garza ... Pair showed promise before Andrade suffered an undisclosed injury ... Lost U.S. belt to Apollo Crews, falling short in subsequent rematches ... Rekindled team with Garza resulted in tough losses to the Street Profits ... Group soon dissolved after infighting ... Lost October match to Garza, only to be attacked by Bray Wyatt in the aftermath. ■

Andrade basks in the moment of his U.S. title defense at last year's Royal Rumble, where he defeated Humberto Carrillo by pinfall.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



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12 QUESTIONS

with **KILLER KELLY**

You're given the chance to interview your favorite wrestler. What questions are you dying to ask them? What would you never *think* to ask?

1 YOU'VE GOTTEN TO DO QUITE A BIT OF TRAVELING AS A WRESTLER. WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE PLACE IN THE WORLD TO VISIT?

KK: As wrestlers, we visit such amazing places, but unfortunately, we only get to see the inside of the venue. My faves have to be London, Tokyo, Hamburg, and Prague! They're so beautiful, and I love walking around cities.

2 IT'S LIKELY YOU'RE THE MOST FAMOUS PRO WRESTLER FROM PORTUGAL SINCE ... EVER. WHAT CAN YOU TELL OUR READERS ABOUT THE WRESTLING SCENE IN YOUR HOME COUNTRY?

KK: Haha there's a couple more, but thank you for saying that! The scene is super small, and not a "business" per say, but the places that have wrestling shows do it mostly for the love of it. And, without Wrestling Portugal (my first wrestling home), I wouldn't be where I am today.

3 YOUR 2018 MATCH WITH MEIKO SATOMURA IS WIDELY CITED AS ONE OF THE BEST MATCHES THAT YEAR. WERE YOU NERVOUS GOING INTO IT?

KK: Very nervous. It was one of the most important matches of my career. And I'm very thankful to Meiko for being such an amazing ring leader.

4 WHAT DO YOU LISTEN TO WHEN TRAVELING TO AND FROM SHOWS?

KK: That's a question I'm never asked, and I'm so glad you did! I listen to the *True Crime All the Time* podcast.

It's my go-to every weekend while traveling (well, when wrestling was a weekly thing). I'm obsessed with it.

5 YOU COMPETED AT JOSH BARNETT'S BLOODSPORT LAST FALL. HOW WAS IT GETTING READY FOR THAT EVENT?

KK: I was nervous for this event ever since it was announced. It was my big opportunity to show what I was worth as an independent wrestler, my big exclamation point. Alexander James, my fiancé [and fellow Bloodsport competitor], knew how important this was for me, so he helped me prepare. And it was the most comfortable I ever was in a match! Can't wait to be part of it again.

6 LOOKING BACK, DO YOU HAVE ANY REGRETS ABOUT YOUR TIME WITH WWE?

KK: I do and I don't. Sometimes, I regret signing a contract at such an early stage of my career, but then I wouldn't have had all the amazing things that came my way because of it.

7 YOU'VE CALLED GERMANY'S WXW YOUR "HOME PROMOTION." WHAT ABOUT WXW KEEPS YOU COMING BACK?

KK: It was the first place that really took a chance on me. Living next to the academy, dealing with the wXw people on a daily basis, touring on the weekends, they really became my family. And, to top it off, they're one of the most professional—and I even dare to say the number one—independent wrestling company in the world right now. They take care of the talent, the shows have top-notch productions, and they're fantastic in everything they do.

8 WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE SNACK FOR AFTER A MATCH/WORKOUT?

KK: I normally chug a big bottle of water. I never have food next to

me, but I damn sure guarantee that I crave a big pizza.

9 HAVING TAKEN PART IN A FEW INTERGENDER MATCHES OVER THE YEARS, IS THAT SOMETHING YOU'D WANT TO DO MORE OF?

KK: Definitely! And you'll never see me do that typical intergender match where the guy bases for every single move. It's always a fight.

10 EVERY YEAR, PWI COMPILES OUR LIST OF THE TOP 100 WOMEN WRESTLERS ON THE PLANET. TELL US ABOUT SOMEONE YOU'VE WORKED WITH WHO MIGHT NOT BE ON OUR RADAR.

KK: Well, it shocked me not seeing Aoife Valkyrie on the list! She's amazing, and one of the best I've stepped into the ring with. And she's currently killing it on *NXT U.K.*! She deserves all the credit.

11 WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH AWAY FROM THE RING IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?

KK: Well, this answer is not going to be very Killer Kelly: In the next five years, I want to already be happily married to Alexander James, and possibly have my own business. Can't say what, but I have a lot of ideas of things that make me happy. I also have a lot of things I want to accomplish in the wrestling business, and I'm pretty sure I'll accomplish what I really want within five years.

12 IN THE SOCIAL DISTANCING ERA, YOU'VE BONDED WITH FANS BY WATCHING SCARY VIDEOS ON TWITCH. WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE HORROR MOVIE OF ALL-TIME?

KK: I have to say more than one: *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Silence of the Lambs*, and *The Conjuring*. ■



KILLER KELLY

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

THE WAY IT WAS

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

THERE ARE SOME who were literally born to be successful athletes. People predetermined from before they ever set foot in a gym to take their place among the all-time greats. People who seem to have been put on Earth to excel at athletic endeavors and become great at whatever they put their mind and determination to. Danny Hodge was one of those people.

When the sports world lost Hodge last Christmas Eve at the age of 88, it lost a man who had achieved feats at a level that will likely never be equaled. He is the only person to ever win national championships in both amateur wrestling and amateur boxing. He was an Olympic silver medalist in middleweight freestyle wrestling at the 1956 Melbourne Summer Games. He was the longest reigning junior heavyweight champion in the history of professional wrestling, and considered by many to have been the greatest ever of what today are typically termed “cruiserweights.”

Part of this was due to a biological abnormality that made Hodge into a real-life superhero. Born in Perry, Oklahoma, in 1932, Hodge came from a troubled background, with an alcoholic father and severely depressed mother who nearly burned the house down, leading young Danny to be taken to live with his grandfather, who was also an alcoholic and beat him

unmercifully. After running away from home to live and work in a firehouse, he determined that he was never going to lose a fight again. And when he started training as a teenager, he discovered an almost miraculous transformation occurring as his body responded in dramatic fashion. It felt like something just clicked inside him overnight, and it would later be discovered that Hodge was born with double-tendons all throughout his body—giving him incredible tensile muscle strength that seemed almost supernatural.

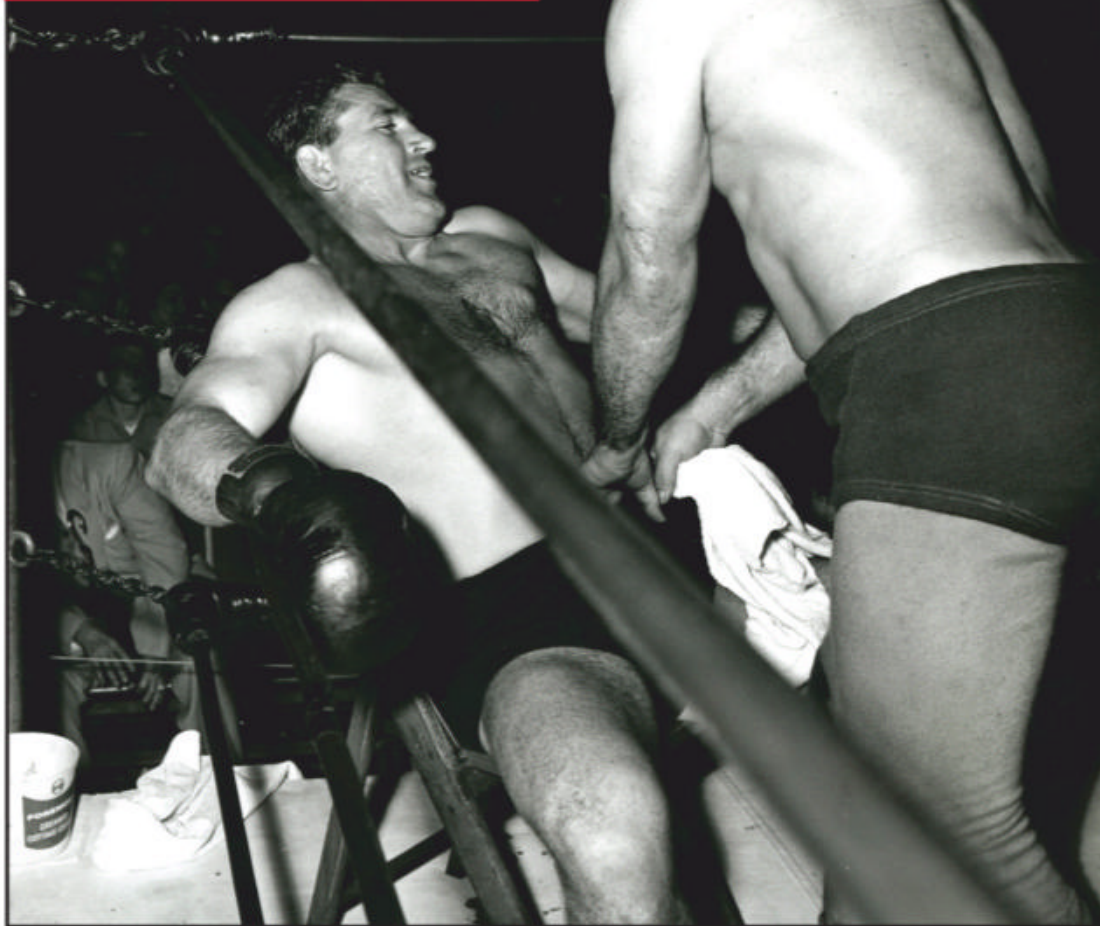
Many are the stories of Hodge crushing apples into sauce with his bare hand, bending metal pliers, and having a handshake like an iron vice. Like all great

superheroes, he opted to put that power to good use. At Perry High School, he won the Oklahoma state wrestling championship in 1951, then went 46-0 at the University of Oklahoma, where he was never even taken off his feet. On the way to that undefeated record, he landed three Big Seven titles and captured the NCAA National championship at 177 pounds during his sophomore, junior, and senior years. He represented the U.S. in freestyle wrestling at the 1952 and 1956 Olympics, and became the first amateur wrestler to ever be featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. To this day, amateur wrestling’s equivalent of the Heisman Trophy, presented by the NCAA each year to the best



Danny Hodge applies a body scissors on the legendary Lou Thesz in a match that would end in a 90-minute draw. Hodge may have been the world’s pre-eminent junior heavyweight, but his amateur background (and incredible strength) allowed him to hang with much larger opponents.

In addition to being an amateur and professional wrestling champion, Hodge was also an esteemed boxer. This 1964 photo was taken in Joplin, Missouri, where he knocked out Terry Garvin in the third of 15 scheduled rounds.



college wrestler in the country, is called the Dan Hodge Trophy. Most who know what they're talking about would call him the greatest amateur wrestler in our nation's history.

But that wasn't enough for Hodge, who also went out for boxing in the 1950s—a time when amateur boxing programs were still commonly found on college campuses, and Golden Gloves championships were among the most prestigious sports accolades in America. In 1958, Hodge won the Chicago Golden Gloves heavyweight title, then went on to defeat Charley Hood at Madison Square Garden to take the national heavyweight Golden Gloves crown in a bout still talked about by pugilism aficionados. He had aspirations of going to the 1960 Olympics in Rome to unprecedentedly compete in both wrestling and boxing, but was instead persuaded by

boxing managers to turn pro as a fighter—a decision he later regretted due to what he perceived as the unscrupulous and shady nature of the business. Hodge was hyped as boxing's next big thing, starting with a first-round knockout in his pro debut. But, after competing for a little over a year and amassing an 8-2 record (two losses coming through controversial and contested decisions), Hodge quit the sport for good.

Many sports purists bemoaned his decision to turn pro as a wrestler instead, disappointed that the country's greatest "real" wrestler would take part in such theatrics. But, from the beginning, Hodge proved them wrong, staying true to his squeaky-clean image and always projecting the excellence of a legitimate grappler while dominating the sport at a level few in his weight class ever had. Along the way, he elevated the

dignity of the sport at a time when most wrote it off as an embarrassing charade unworthy of any respectable athlete's attention.

Hodge was brought into the business in 1959 by Leroy McGuirk, another former junior heavyweight standout who then was the promoter of the southern wrestling territory that covered Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Mississippi. He introduced Hodge to the legendary Ed "Strangler" Lewis, who helped enhance his already impressive wrestling knowledge with the kinds of "hooks" and submission maneuvers that made him one of the most dangerous men on the planet. He held the NWA World junior heavyweight championship with only a few short interruptions between 1960 and 1973, making him the junior heavyweight equivalent of Lou Thesz or Bruno Sammartino. He captured it for a seventh time in 1976, his reign ended by a devastating car accident that broke his neck and cut his career tragically short at age 44.

Nevertheless, Hodge remained one of the most respected men in the business, cited by the likes of Jim Ross, Jerry Brisco, Kurt Angle, Edge, and many others as one of the toughest men who ever lived. Even in old age, his incredible physical power remained intact, as he would still regularly be asked to perform his legendary feats of strength. Some say if Danny Hodge had come along in this day and age, he would've gone into MMA instead of professional wrestling, and would've dominated that sport as well. Whether that's true or not, it is to pro wrestling's great benefit that he chose to honor it with his participation. He uplifted the sport, while leaving behind a legacy that will enrich its history for all time. □

PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED
JANUARY 31, 2021

HEAVYWEIGHT

- 1 KOTA IBUSHI**
205, Kagoshima, Japan
(-) IWGP/Intercontinental champion
- 2 KENNY OMEGA**
203, Winnipeg, MB
(1) AEW & AAA champion
- 3 ROMAN REIGNS**
265, Pensacola, FL
(3) WWE Universal champion
- 4 DREW MCINTYRE**
(6) 265, Ayr, Scotland
(4) WWE heavyweight champion
- 5 RICH SWANN**
200, Baltimore, MD
(5) Impact heavyweight champion
- 6 FINN BALOR**
190, Bray, Ireland
(6) NXT heavyweight champion
- 7 JACOB FATU**
300, Samoa
(7) MLW heavyweight champion
- 8 GO SHIOZAKI**
243, Kumamoto, Japan
(-) GHC heavywight champion
- 9 DARBY ALLIN**
180, Seattle, WA
(10) AEW TNT champion
- 10 BOBBY LASHLEY**
273, Denver, CO
(9) WWE U.S. champion

WOMEN

- 1 UTAMI HAYASHISHITA**
142, Kagoshima, Japan
(2) World of Stardom champion
- 2 SASHA BANKS**
115, Fairfield, CA
(1) Smackdown Women's champion
- 3 BIANCA BELAIR**
134, Knoxville, TN
(10) #1 contender Smackdown
- 4 DEONNA PURRAZZO**
112, Livingston, NJ
(5) Knockouts champion
- 5 ASUKA**
137, Osaka, Japan
(3) Raw Women's champion
- 6 KAY LEE RAY**
(-) 112, Paisley, U.K.
NXT U.K. Women's champion
- 7 SERENA DEEB**
130, Fairfax, VA
(4) NWA Women's champion
- 8 HIKARU SHIDA**
126, Kanagawa, Japan
(6) AEW Women's champion
- 9 ALEXA BLISS**
(-) 101, Columbus, OH
- 10 IO SHIRAI**
119, Kanagawa, Japan
(7) NXT Women's champion

TAG TEAMS

- 1 MATT & NICK JACKSON**
Combined weight: 350 pounds
(1) AEW tag team champions
- 2 KARL ANDERSON & DOC GALLOWS**
Combined weight: 505 pounds
(5) Impact Wrestling tag team champions
- 3 TAMA TONGA & TANGA LOA**
Combined weight: 430 pounds
(9) IWGP tag team champions
- 4 DAX HARWOOD & CASH WHEELER**
(4) Combined Weight: 446 pounds
- 5 NIA JAX & SHAYNA BASZLER**
Combined weight: 422 pounds
(10) WWE Women's tag team champions
- 6 CEDRIC ALEXANDER & SHELTON BENJAMIN**
Combined weight: 453 pounds
(-) Raw tag team champions
- 7 DOLPH ZIGGLER & ROBERT ROODE**
Combined weight: 453 pounds
(-) Smackdown tag team champions
- 8 ISIAH KASSIDY & MARQ QUEN**
Combined weight: 425 pounds
(-) #1 contenders AEW tag title
- 9 DANNY BURCH & ONEY LORCAN**
Combined weight: 380 pounds
(8) NXT tag team champions
- 10 LA PARK & EL HIJO DE LA PARK**
Combined weight: 420 pounds
(-) MLW tag team champions

WWE RAW

Champion:
DREW MCINTYRE
(C) 265, Ayr, Scotland

- 1—BOBBY LASHLEY**
(1) 273, Denver, CO
- 2—RANDY ORTON**
(2) 250, St. Louis, MO
- 3—AJ STYLES**
(3) 218, Gainesville, GA
- 4—MUSTAFA ALI**
(4) 182, Chicago, IL
- 5—KEITH LEE**
(4) 340, Wichita Falls, TX
- 6—JEFF HARDY**
(-) 225, Cameron, NC
- 7—RIDDLE**
(-) 216, Las Vegas, NV
- 8—SHEAMUS**
(-) 267, Dublin, Ireland
- 9—XAVIER WOODS**
(-) 205, Atlanta, GA
- 10—CEDRIC ALEXANDER**
(8) 205, Charlotte, NC

SMACKDOWN

Champion:
ROMAN REIGNS
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL

- 1—BIG E**
(3) 285, Tampa, FL
- 2—JEY USO**
(1) 227, San Francisco, CA
- 3—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA**
(-) 229, Kyoto, Japan
- 4—SAMI ZAYN**
(2) 212, Montreal, QC
- 5—KEVIN OWENS**
(7) 266, Marietta, GA
- 6—DANIEL BRYAN**
(-) 210, Aberdeen, WA
- 7—SETH ROLLINS**
(5) 217, Davenport, IA
- 8—KING CORBIN**
(9) 275, Kansas City, MO
- 9—REY MYSTERIO**
(4) 175, San Diego, CA
- 10—APOLLO CREWS**
(-) 240, Sacramento, CA

AEW

Champion:
KENNY OMEGA
(C) 203, Winnipeg, MB

- 1—DARBY ALLIN**
(1) 180, Seattle, WA
- 2—JON MOXLEY**
(2) 224, Cincinnati, OH
- 3—BRIAN CAGE**
(3) 278, Chico, CA
- 4—CODY RHODES**
(5) 220, Atlanta, GA
- 5—MJF**
(4) 216, Plainview, NY
- 6—ORANGE CASSIDY**
(6) 180, Stewartville, NJ
- 7—CHRIS JERICHO**
(7) 227, Winnipeg, MB
- 8—EDDIE KINGSTON**
(8) 240, Yonkers, NY
- 9—ADAM PAGE**
(9) 228, Aaron's Creek, VA
- 10—PAC**
(10) 194, Newcastle, UK

IMPACT

Champion:
RICH SWANN
(3) 200, Baltimore, MD

- 1—TJP**
(-) 167, The Philippines
- 2—MOOSE**
(4) 295, Atlanta, GA
- 3—ROHIT RAJU**
(3) 172, Saginaw, MI
- 4—CHRIS BEY**
(2) 180, Alexandria, VA
- 5—WILLIE MACK**
(6) 280, Los Angeles
- 6—ACE AUSTIN**
(-) 190, Atlantic City
- 7—ERIC YOUNG**
(5) 232, Nashville, TN
- 8—SAMI CALLIHAN**
(8) 207, Bellefontaine, OH
- 9—CRAZZY STEVE**
(-) 200, Montreal, QC
- 10—BRIAN MYERS**
(10) 223, Glen Cove, NY

ROH

Champion:
RUSH
(C) 240, Jalisco, Mexico

- 1—DRAGON LEE**
(3) 214, Jalisco, Mexico
- 2—JONATHAN GRESHAM**
(2) 175, Atlanta, GA
- 3—BRODY KING**
(1) 285, Los Angeles
- 4—PCO**
(8) 300, Montreal, QC
- 5—TRACY WILLIAMS**
(-) 190, Brooklyn, NY
- 6—JOSH WOODS**
(5) 220, West Palm Beach
- 7—SHANE TAYLOR**
(7) 315, Cleveland, OH
- 8—JAY LETHAL**
(6) 215, Elizabeth, NJ
- 9—DANHAUSEN**
(-) 326, Detroit, MI
- 10—TONY DEPPEN**
(-) 165, Shamokin, PA

Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, Jason McVeigh, and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue.



PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA

UTAMI HAYASHISHITA

ALL JAPAN PRO WRESTLING:
CHAMPION—Suwama; 1—Shotaro Ashino; 2—Kohei Sato; 3—Koji Iwamoto; 4—Jun Kasai; 5—Zeus; 6—Jake Lee; 7—Izanagi; 8—Fuminori Abe; 9—Hokuto Omori; 10—Shuji Ishikawa

DRAGON GATE: **CHAMPION**—Shun Skywalker; 1—Kai; 2—Kzy; 3—Keisuke Okuda; 4—SB KENTO; 5—Eita; 6—BxB Hulk; 7—HYO; 8—Dragon Kid; 9—Bokutimo Dragon; 10—Kaito Ishida

GAME CHANGER WRESTLING:
CHAMPION—Rickey Shane Page; 1—Jordan Oliver; 2—Chris Dickinson; 3—Alex Colon; 4—Matthew Justice; 5—Mance Warner; 6—AJ Gray; 7—1 Called Manders; 8—Ken Broadway; 9—Holidead; 10—Atticus Cogar

INSANE CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: **CHAMPION**—Noam Dar; 1—Liam Thompson; 2—Stevie Boy; 3—Sha Samuels; 4—Jack Jester; 5—BT Gunn; 6—Leyton Buzzard; 7—Kez Evans; 8—DCT; 9—Jason Reed; 10—Luca de Pazzi

NXT U.K.: **CHAMPION**—WALTER; 1—Rampage Brown; 2—A-Kid; 3—Ilja Dragunov; 4—Joe Coffey; 5—Dave Mastiff; 6—Jordan Devlin; 7—Ben Carter; 8—Tyler Bate; 9—Sha Samuels; 10—Amir Jordan

REVOLUTION PRO: **CHAMPION**—Zack Sabre Jr.; 1—Michael Oku; 2—Ricky Knight Jr.; 3—Dan Moloney; 3—Charlie Sterling; 5—Screwface Ahmed; 6—JJ Gale; 7—Joel Redman; 8—Rob Lias; 9—Brendan White; 10—Chuck Mambo

WESTSIDE XTREME WRESTLING:
CHAMPION—Bobby Gunns; 1—Marius Al-Ani; 2—Cara Noir; 3—Metehan; 4—Tristan Archer; 5—Avalanche; 6—Senza Volto; 7—Fast Time Moodo; 8—Prince Ahura; 9—Norman Harras; 10—Vincent Heisenberg

WORLD WONDER RING STARDOM:
CHAMPION—Utami Hayashishita; 1—Syuri; 2—Giulia; 3—Mayu Iwatani; 4—Bea Priestley; 5—Konami; 6—Tam Nakano; 7—Momo Watanabe; 8—AZM; 9—Saya Kamitani; 10—Saya Iida

NXT	MEXICO	NEW JAPAN	MLW	INDEPENDENT
Champion: FINN BALOR (C) 190, Bray, Ireland	Note: AAA/CMLL ratings combined due to lack of events	Champion: KOTA IBUSHI (C) 205, Kagoshima, Japan	Champion: JACOB FATU (C) 300, Samoa	Champion: WARHORSE (-) 193, St. Louis, MO
1—JOHNNY GARGANO (3) 199, Cleveland, OH	1—KENNY OMEGA (-) 203, Winnipeg, MB	1—SANADA (1) 220, Niigata, Japan	1—ALEX HAMMERSTONE (1) 251, Phoenix, AZ	1—GENKAI (-) UNK, UNKNOWN
2—KUSHIDA (4) 187, Tokyo, Japan	2—ULTIMO GUERRERO (8) 212, Yamanashi, Japan	2—SHINGO TAKAGI (4) 212, Yamanashi, Japan	2—TOM LAWLOR (3) 205, Las Vegas, NV	2—JOHN WAYNE MURDOCH (-) 220, Waxahachie, TX
3—KYLE O'REILLY (-) 200, Delta, BC	3—PAGANO (7) 234, Juarez, Mexico	3—HIROMU TAKAHASHI (5) 194, Tokyo, Japan	3—LOW KI (2) 174, Brooklyn, NY	3—AJ GRAY (-) 240, Nashville, TN
4—TOMMASO CIAMPA (5) 201, Milwaukee, WI	4—ANGEL DE ORO (2) 181, Torreon, Mexico	4—HIROSHI TANAHASHI (7) 223, Gifu, Japan	4—LIO RUSH (-) 160, Los Angeles	4—MO ATLAS (-) 290, Chicago, IL
5—ADAM COLE (10) 210, Panama City, FL	5—REY FENIX (-) 185, Mexico City	5—TETSUYA NAITO (2) 225, Tokyo, Japan	5—MADS KRUGGER (10) UNK, UNKNOWN	5—AC MACK (-) 220, Atlanta, GA
6—SANTOS ESCOBAR (6) 198, Mexico City	6—FELINO (10) 190, Mexico City	6—GREAT-O-KHAN (-) 254, Gunma, Japan	6—RICHARD HOLLIDAY (6) 237, Westport, CT	6—DEREK NEAL (-) 240, Bowling Green, KY
7—TIMOTHY THATCHER (7) 228, Sacramento, CA	7—PENTAGON JR. (-) 207, Mexico City	7—KAZUCHIKA OKADA (6) 236, Tokyo, Japan	7—MIL MUERTES (-) 255, UNKNOWN	7—CHRISTIAN CASANOVA (-) 175, Boston, MA
8—KARRION KROSS (-) 265, New York, NY	8—NIEBLA ROJA (4) 185, Torreon, Mexico	8—EL PHANTASMO (-) 196, Vancouver, BC	8—MYRON REED (5) 173, Louisville, KY	8—TRISH ADORA (-) 175, Washington, D.C.
9—BRONSON REED (-) 330, Adelaide, Aus	9—GRAN GUERRERO (-) 209, Gomez Palacio	9—TOMOAKI HONMA (-) 216, Yamagata, Japan	9—DAIVARI (-) 202, Tehran, Iran	9—WHEELER YUTA (-) 190, Philadelphia, PA
10—DEXTER LUMIS (8) 238, Jacksonville, FL	10—EUFORIA (-) 214, Torreon, Mexico	10—EL DESPERADO (10) 198, Niigata, Japan	10—ACH (7) 222, Austin, TX	10—LEE MORIARTY (-) 185, Pittsburgh, PA

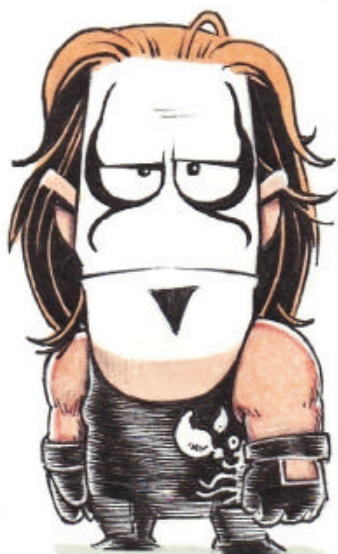


DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN

STING SAID HE RETURNED
TO AEW, AS HE FEELS HE
STILL HAS SOMETHING TO GIVE.

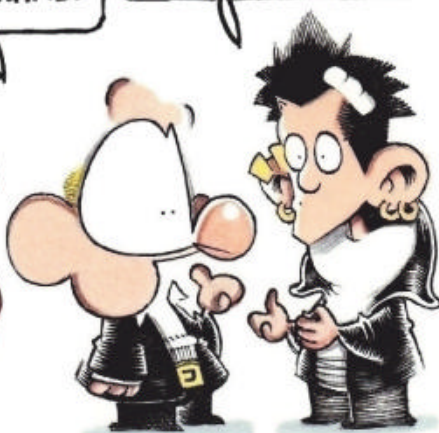
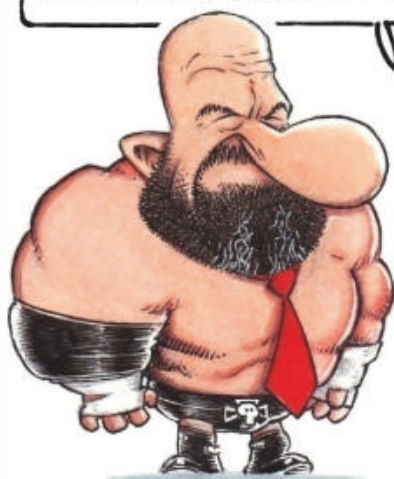
YEAH.. HIS BANK
DETAILS TO TONY
KHAN'S ACCOUNTANT
MOST NOTABLY!!



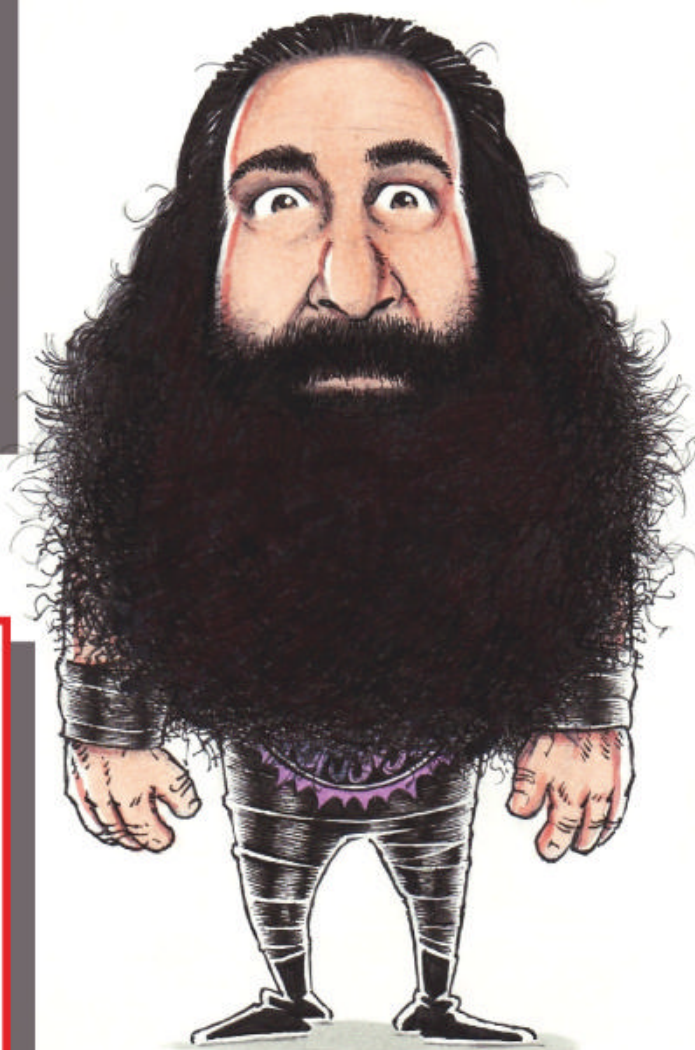
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mrjcomics.com

ORIGINALLY KNOWN AS HUNTER
HEARST HELMSLEY, FANS ONLINE
WOULD OFTEN REFER TO HIM UNDER
THE ABBREVIATED ACRONYM OF "HHH".
EVENTUALLY, THIS VERSION BECAME
HIS ACCEPTED WRESTLING "NAME".

STRANGELY, USING
JUST THE INITIALS OF
YOUR NAME DIDN'T
CATCH ON QUITE AS WELL
FOR BIG SHOW !!



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